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## Research Article

### PUJAS AND FESTIVALS OF NATARAJA TEMPLE AT CHIDAMBARAM

Veerachelvam K

Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

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#### ABSTRACT

Hindu temples are the embodiment of rituals, *pujas* and festivals. *Pujas* are considered as a service of man to god. The term '*Puja*' is derived from the Dravidian word *pu* which means flower and *cey* means to do. *Puja* means worship accompanied by certain formality and offerings. Shiva *pujas* are classified into three parts, namely (1) *Nitya pujas* (*Santhi pujas*-daily *pujas*), (ii) *Naimittika pujas* (monthly *pujas* worship on auspicious days) and (iii) *kamya pujas* (*Prarthana* by private worshippers). Worship in the Nataraja temple is conducted in *Vaidika puja* pattern as laid down by Patanjali. It resembles the rituals of domestic worship and not the *Agama* form. In the Nataraja temple, the *pujas* are conducted regularly six times every day. They are *Kala Sandhi*, Second *Kalam*, *Uchi Kalam*, *Saya Rakshai*, Second *Kalam* and *Artha Jamam*. Two are Brahmotsavam's (great festivals), *Ani Thirumanjanam* and *Arudra Darsanam* in the Tamil month of *Ani* and *Margali* respectively. Thus Natyanjali at Chidambaram has proved its worthiness as a fountain head and the mother festival for all the events throughout the state.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Hindu temples are the embodiment of rituals, *pujas* and festivals. *Smiritis* and *Agamic* canons describe the various modes of the performance of *pujas* and other rituals in the temples. They also specifically fix the time for the *pujas* and materials which should be used during that time. *Pujas* are considered as a service of man to god. The term '*Puja*' is derived from the Dravidian word *pu* which means flower and *cey* means to do. *Puja* means worship accompanied by certain formality and offerings. It creates a kind of devotional flavour. *Puja* can be classified as *atmarta* and *paramarta*. *Atmarta* reflects the *puja* performed by the worshipper for the welfare of himself and his family in his own house according to his ability. *Paramarta puja* is performed in the temple by the principal performer (*archaka*) according to the *Agama* rules for the general welfare of all the people. Shiva *pujas* are classified into three parts, namely (1) *Nitya pujas* (*Santhi pujas*-daily *pujas*), (ii) *Naimittika pujas* (monthly *pujas* worship on auspicious days) and (iii) *kamya pujas* (*Prarthana* by private worshippers). Festivals and special *kalam* occasions served as a unifying factor between the rules and the ruled. Temples and festivals always go together, one cannot think of a temple without a festival.

#### *Pujas in Kanaka Sabha*

Worship in the Nataraja temple is conducted in *Vaidika puja* pattern as laid down by Patanjali. It resembles the rituals of domestic worship and not the *Agama* form. In the Nataraja temple, the *pujas* are conducted regularly six times every day. Sometimes special *pujas* are also conducted on some occasions. They are performed by *Dikshitar*s alone who were the hereditary priests of the temple. The special *pujas* were conducted with garlands, flowers, nectar, camphor, fruits, ghee, *payasam*, etc.

There is an exacting but remarkably well executed schedule of daily *pujas* at the Lord Nataraja shrine, and they are called the six *kalams* (specified points of time). They are *Kala Sandhi*, Second *Kalam*, *Uchi Kalam*, *Saya Rakshai*, Second *Kalam* and *Artha Jamam*. The credit for the strict adherence to and smooth execution of this tight schedule goes entirely to the *Dikshitar*s fraternity and the *kattalai* (committed contributions to worship) of course by the will and command of the Lord. Of the Six *kalams*, three are in the morning and three in the evening.

The temple opens at 5 A.M. In the *palliarai* the decorated bedroom in the first *prakara* where the holy sandals of the Lord Nataraja are ceremonially lodged for the night and offered of

\*Corresponding author: Veerachelvam K

Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar

milk, fruit and parched rice are made as *neivedyam*, *diparadhana* (worship by waving of lighted camphor and lamps). The Lord Nataraja's holy sandals are then carried in a tiny, beautiful palanquin to the Kanaka Sabha and then placed in the Cit Sabha close to Lord Nataraja then, milk, fruit and parched rice are ceremonially offered to Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakami. This morning ritual is called *pal neivedyan* (offering of milk to the Lord).

At each *kalam*, *abhishekam* of the *Sphatika Linga* (Candramaulisvara) in the Kanaka Sabha is followed by offering of *neivedyam* and a *diparadhana* to Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakami in two phases, the first from the Kanaka Sabha and the second within the Cit Sabha itself, the time-gap between the two being filled by propitiatory chants (*mantras*) addressed to the Lord by the Dikshitaras and the recitation of *Tevaram* hymns by the *Oduvars*.

### **Kala Sandhi**

A *kumbha-puja* and a *homam* are performed at 6.30 A.M. followed *abhishekam* with *pancagavyam*, offering of *neivedyam*, and *diparadhana* to Lord Nataraja and Sivakami at 9 A.M.

### **Second Kalam**

The full *abhishekam* for the *Sphatika Linga* is performed, at 10.30 A.M., the ruby image of Rathinasabhapathi (or Manikka Nataraja) is offered an *abhishekam* with milk, honey and sandal paste. A beautiful feature of the ritual is that when lighted camphor is waved from in front, the image appears dark with an overtone of a golden hue, while the contour is magnificent and when the lighted camphor is waved from the rear, the  *jyoti*  of Nataraja radiates a sense of incomparable are and beauty. Such a *puja* and *darsan* of the Rathinasabhapathi icon is offered only at this period. All these rituals are performed in the Kanaka Sabha. The *diparadhana* to Lord Nataraja at 11 A.M. rounds off this *kalam*.

### **Uchi Kalam**

This *puja* comprises an *abhishekam* to the *Sphatika Linga* and a *neivedyam*, followed by a *diparadhana* to the Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakami at noon. These three pujas are considered as morning *pujas*. The temple is closed after this *kalam* to re-open only evening at 5 P.M.

### **Saya-Rakshai**

Undoubtedly the most elaborate and colourful of the six *kalams*, this is a thrilling experience for the eye, ear and heart. After the *abhishekam* to the *Sphatika Linga*, at 6 P.M. the *Shodasa upacara*. Sixteen kinds of offerings, including waving of lighted lamps and camphor and (metallic) flag, fan, umbrella etc. from the Kanaka Sabha, followed by the chanting of *mantras* and singing of the *Tevaram* hymns by *Oduvars*, A display three times of the *Chidambara Rahasyam* rounds off this *kalam*.

### **Second Kalam (At 7 P.M.)**

An *abhishekam* is performed for the *Sphatika Linga*, followed by a *puja* to the *Chidambara Rahasya*. The door and windows of the Cit Sabha are completely closed and all entries barred. Only the Dikshitaras assigned for the day and his assistant in performing the *puja* to the *Rahasyam* are permitted inside the

Cit Sabha. It is understood that an elaborate *puja* of *Navavarana* or a *laghu-puja* (a light one) of *Panchavarana* is performed to the 'Sri Rahasyam'. This routine is followed throughout the year. During the festival days, however, this *puja* is performed in the morning, before the second *kalam*, as the *Pancha-murtis*, the processional deities, would have gone out of the temple premises during the other hours. The *diparadhana* finale of the second *kalam* of the evening takes place at 8 P.M.

### **Artha Jamam**

This *puja* rounds off the day's schedule of worship to Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakami. At 9 P.M., an *abhishekam* of the *Sphatika Linga* and a *neivedyam* take place, followed by a *diparadhana* to Lord Nataraja at 10 P.M. The Lord Nataraja's holy sandals (*Sri Shiva-padukas*) are ceremonially taken out of the Cit Sabha, placed in a palanquin and carried to the nearby *palliarai*. *Neivedyam* and *diparadhana* are again offered there, followed by similar rituals to Brahma, Chandeswara, Bhairava and *Artha Jama* Alagar, bringing this *puja* to a close.

### **Maha abhishekams**

The *abishekams* or sacred baths are given to the Lord Nataraja and the Goddess Sivakami in the Thousand Pillared Hall at the end of festivals. The two *darsanam* days of those festivals are between 3 A.M and 6 A.M., before Sunrise. The other four are performed in the Kanaka Sabha, the gathering witnessing the ceremony from the first *prakara* and the *mantapa* in front of the Lord Nataraja and Govindaraja shrines. The prescribed auspicious days and venues for these six ceremonies.

*Mahabhishekam* (the great holy bathing) of the deities, Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari, is conducted six times in a every year, on certain specified dates.

1. *Tiruvonam* star day, month of *Chithirai*, at the Kanaka Sabha.
2. *Utara* star day, month of *Ani*, at the Thousand Pillared Mantapa, as part of the *Ani Thirumanjanam* festival.
3. The *Purvapaksha caturdasi* day in the month of *Avani* at the Kanaka Sabha.
4. The *Purvapaksha caturdasi* day in the month of *Purattasi* at the Kanaka Sabha.
5. *Arudra (Tiruvadirai)* star day, month of *Margali*, at the Thousand-Pillared *Mantapa*, as part of the *Arudra Darsanam* festival.
6. The *Purvapaksha caturdasi* day in the month of *Masi* at the Kanaka Sabha.

Sri Chandramaulisvara (the *Sphatika Linga*): The *Sphatika Linga*, normally kept in close proximity to Lord Nataraja, near the *Pranava Pitha*, in the Cit Sabha, is known as Sri Chandramaulisvara. Six *abhishekams* are performed to this *Linga* daily.

The *Sphatika Linga* here represents infinite space (pure as crystal and limitless), While Lord Nataraja has a *rupa* (formed) and the *Chidambara Rahasyam* is *arupa* (formless), the *Sphatika Linga* is considered *aruparupa* (form and formless). Stated another way, Lord Nataraja is *sakala*, the *Rahasyam* is *nishkala* and the *Sphatika Linga* is *sakalanishkala*. According to the *Chidambara Mahatmyam*, in the dim past, Lord Nataraja concentrated the ray of the moon emanating from his head into

a solid *Sphatika Linga* and gifted it for worship to the 'Tri-sahasra munis' (the 'Three Thousand of Thillai').

### **Ani Tirumanjanam**

Two are Brahmotsavam's (great festivals), *Ani Thirumanjanam* and *Arudra Darsanam* in the Tamil month of *Ani* and *Margali* respectively. These two *Mahabhishekams* are performed in the *Raja Sabha* (Thousand Pillared Mandapa) before Sunrise. The remaining four are performed in the Kanaka Sabha.

Reckoning ten days ahead of this day, the festival opens with the *Dhvajarohana* (the hoisting of the holy flag) on the flag-staff in front of the Lord Nataraja's shrine in the second *prakara*. Certain preliminary rituals like *Vigneshvara puja*, *Anujnai*, *Vastu Santi* and *Rakshabandhana* are performed on the two days preceding the *Dhvajarohana* day. In the *Dhvajarohana puja*, *arohanam* is conducted to all the *devatas*, the deities of the 'eight directions'. Brahma and Akasa who are thereby invoked; the ten *Balipithas* are consecrated and the *santhi* rituals are performed seeking the Lord's grace for a successful celebration of the festival.

From the evening of the first day of the festival to the morning of the eighth day, the *Utsava murthi's* (processional deities) which are the *Pancha murthi's* (the five deities): Somaskanda, Sivakamasundari, Subrahmanya, Vinayaka and Chandekeswara are taken out in procession (twice daily) over the four car streets of Chidambaram in Gold and Silver plated *mancams* (compact canopies supported by four tastefully fabricated pillars which are sized to accommodate the decorated icons) and in the night processions, various vehicles appropriate to the deities with Gold or Silver casements, are used to carry the deities.

The *Rathotsava* (Car festival) on the ninth day and *Ani Thirumanjanam* and the grand *darsan* of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari as they emerge from the Thousand Pillared *Mantapa* on the tenth day of the festival constitute the highlight of the eleven-day festival. On the preceding afternoon, the icons of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari are decorated with the precious jewellery collection of the temple and the icons are covered with a local shawl except for the exposure of the face for public view and the *kala pujas* performed. In the early hours of the Car festival day, the ritual of *yatra dana* (prayerful offering at the commencement of the journey) signals the departure of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari from the Chit Sabha, Kanaka Sabha. The forward and backward movement of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari, alternately in quick succession, as they pass through the first and second *prakaras* and on to the east *sannadhi* street to the *Teradi* stir up intense emotional fervour among the thousands of devotees who throng the entire temple premises. The music thrills and the incense refreshes the people.

A display of unalloyed devotion to the cosmic dancer and his consort is fully brought out by this fascinating spectacle. The emotionally charged crowds move on with but one single thought of Lord Nataraja and his consort. As the cars move on along the four car streets, thousands of devotees view with one another to pick up the thick ropes and pull the cars. Coconuts are broken and lighted camphor is waved by thousands of householders on the route, the front of their homes profusely decorated with rangoli. Hundreds of garlands, flowers and

fruits, baskets and varieties of silken wear are sent up to the Dikshitar accompanying the deities on the cars on the move for repeated decoration of the Lord and his consort. It is a gorgeous spectacle every moment of the days march.

A close glimpse of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari is possible only on two days of each of the two *Brahmotsavams* which means on four days in a year. The decorations on the rear of the icons of Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari bring out the rare dignity and charm of the icons. The fishermen community justifiably regards, Goddess Sivakamasundari as a daughter of their fraternity.

Just as Meenakshi, in Madurai is looked upon as a fisherman's daughter, so is Sivakamasundari in Chidambaram. Lord Nataraja is the son-in-law of fishermen community to whom, as well to their daughter Sivakamasundari, all honours are done on the happy occasion of the *Rathotsava* by them. Along with Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari, Vinayaka, Subrahmanya and Candekeswara are also taken out of an individual care around the four car streets on the *Rathotsava* day. Late in the evening, the '*Kattalai*' offerings are carried to the cars to the accompaniment of *Nagasvaram* music and the *Ubhayadars*. *Neivedyam* (offerings) and camphor worship after, Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari are moved out of the cars in a colourful procession to the front portion of the Thousand Pillared Mantapa for the *Ehakala Laksharchana* and *Neivedyam*, followed by *Mantrakshatai* and *Deeparadhana*. The *vilva puja* is a delight for the eye and the soul.

*Ani Thirumanjanam* is celebrated on the tenth day. The Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari are decorated with sumptuous ornaments and the large collection of silks, garlands and flowers; and preparations are made overnight for their holy and ceremonial bathing (*mahabhishekam*) from 3 Am the next morning. This is completed usually before Sunrise, pot full of milk, tender-coconut water, honey and sandalwood paste, among many other items offered for it, make the *mahabhishekam* an ideal occasion for meditation on the supreme reign. The beauty of the contours of the two icons is brought out before the devotee's eye in striking contrast to the colorful and innate view of the decorated deities on the *Rathotsava* day.

On the night of the *Ani Tirumanjanam* day, the *dhvajarohana* takes place. The two *ghatas* (pots) of holy water, consecrated at the *Yagasala* from the commencement of the festival, are used for *prokshana* (sprinkling of the sanctified water Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivakamasundari) and for the *abisheka* of the *Sphatika Linga*, Chandramaulisvara. On the night of the eleventh day, the festival is rounded off with a *Muttuppallakku* for the *pancha murtis* tastefully decorated palanquins carry the *Utsava murtis* around the temple along the four car streets.

### **Arudra Darsanam**

Of the two *Brahmotsavams* of the Lord Nataraja temple, *Arudra Darsanam* is particularly important for the Chit Sabha. Ten days ahead of the day of the *Tiruvadirai* star in the Tamil month of *Margali*, the festival flag is hoisted (*Dhvajarohana*). The pattern of the ten days *Arudra Darsanam* festival is the same as that of *Ani Thirumanjanam* festival with a difference that in the *Arudra* festival, Saint Manikkavasakar is accorded a

special status in the rituals of worship during the festival period. In the *Sayaraksha diparadhana* (around 6 pm) of Lord Nataraja, a decorated icon of Saint Manikkavasakar is brought in procession and stationed before the Lord. Likewise, Manikkavasakar is taken out in procession in the morning on the ten days of the *Arudra* festival and when the *Arudra Darsanam* is over, *diparadhana* is offered to Manikkavasakar also.

### **Natyanjali Festival**

Apart from the two *Brahmotsavams* of Lord Nataraja temple at Chidambaram world famous Natyanjali festival is celebrated every year in a grand manner. Maha Sivaratri day is considered as one of the most auspicious days for the Saivites. Throughout the night, all the temples dedicated to Shiva are kept open and devotees throng the temple and *pujas* go on continuously throughout the night. People keep awake through the entire night from dusk to dawn and meditate Shiva, To free them from the eternal cycle of births and deaths.

Doing *pujas* in a conventional way involves the ritual of *abhishekams*, *archanas*, and *aradhanas*. Chanting of Vedic mantras, rendering devotional songs like *Tevaram* and *Thiruvagasam*. Dance is one of the mode of worship. *Sangeetham* and *Nirutham* are part of the sixteen offerings made to the supreme deity by the mortal human beings. From ancient days, this practice of worshipping the Lord through the medium of music and dance had remained in vogue. This is one of the reasons for our ancient heritage and literature being endowed with and abounded by so much of devotional music and hymns.

All these cultural events as long as they were within the walls of the temple were in a way endowed with responsibility and guided people towards cherished values and in fact strengthened the *Bhakthi* cult. The introduction of fusion and modernity concepts in the classical dance is yet another side of the story for which have no space here. The Lord is said to perform his Dance of Bliss known as "Anandha Thandava". It is stated to symbolize the eternal movement of the Universe and further symbolize the Fivefold functions of creation, destruction, grace, dissolution and blessing. The icon of the Lord Nataraja represents this fivefold functions and is appreciated all over the world by art connoisseurs for its exquisite beauty and aesthetic appearance.

For the artistes of dance, this place and the figure had been a perennial inspiration. They always get inspired by seeing the icon of the Lord Nataraja and start the dance with a worship of this Lord of Dance. It is always a dream of every dancer who practice any of the classical dance forms make a trip to Chidambaram and they offer their dance as worship to the Lord of Dance. Thus the medium of dance is an important expression of devotion and worship for the practitioners of *Natya*, the offering of their dance is the most eloquent *Anjali*. During the four decades after 1940 with a view to revive and consolidate this tradition and to imbibe in the artiste's devotional spirit of the art an effort to start Natyanjali as an annual event, was first started in 1981. With the co-operation of Dikshitar, the hereditary custodians of the temple, the dancers and danseuses, cultural organization like *Sangeet Natak Akademi*. South Zone Cultural Center, Institutions like Annamalai University, Neyveli Lignite Corporation, banks and

corporate bodies and Philanthropists donate plenty to conduct the above Natyanjali.

Over the years, Natyanjali has grown into a National Level Festival presenting all styles of Indian classical dances. The participation and response have acquired international dimension. The event which extends for five days now features about 300 to 350 performing artists and an equal number of accompanying artists during the five days. The event which started by the small committee originally, later consolidated itself as a trust known as "Natyanjali Trust" which is now conducting the festival in a systematic and consistent manner with high ethical standards, principle and norms for five days every year.

Now the Natyanjali festival is being organized in several town like Kumbakonam, Thanjavur, Thiruvaiyaru, Nagapattinam, Sirkali, Trichy, Perur, Tiruvarur and several other small towns. It has given an impetus to establish several dance schools, employment to several dance teachers and the enthusiasm among the children and parents to learn the art.

Thus Natyanjali at Chidambaram has proved its worthiness as a fountain head and the mother festival for all the events throughout the state. The event has also cultivated the audience who have learnt to enjoy and appreciate the dance and encourage artists also. Thus the festival has served the public in several ways and will continue to serve the society as one of the most important cultural events with noble social objectives.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram the *pujas* are conducted regularly six times every day. Sometimes special *pujas* are conducted with garlands, flowers, nectar, camphor, fruits, ghee, *payasam* etc., for the respective deities. Special *pujas* are offered on the prescribed auspicious days. Pujas and festivals are celebrated with fervour and grandeur for Nataraja at Chidambaram. *Mahabhishekam* is conducted six times in a year for the Lord. Finally Natyanjali is a fountain head and mother festival for all events dedicated to Lord Nataraja. Lord Nataraja is instant for devotees *darsanam* in following viz., *Ani Thirumanjanam* and *Arudra darsanam*. During those days he performance *Ananta Tandava* with his consort Sivakamiamman. Chidambaram is the centre of cosmos where Lord Nataraja is performing his cosmic dance. It is a belief of the people that the earth is moving only because of the cosmic dance Lord Nataraja.

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