



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

STRUCTURE OF THE CAR OF SRI SOMANATHER TEMPLE ATTUR - A STUDY

History

KEY WORDS: Cakadai or Cattattēr Tervidi, vairather (Diamand car), Iconographical excellence

Dr. K. Karuppaiah Kothali Village Kayathar Taluk, Thoothukudi District, Tamil Nadu

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to describe the structure of car of Sri Somanather temple at Attur of Tamil Nadu. A car is a group of wood carved monument noted for its structural and iconographical excellence. It was not just a monument of architectural and iconographical excellence but an institution which was deep-rooted in the socio-economic and religious tradition of the society. As an institution, it acquired a multi-dimensional character encompassing the entire fabric of the Attur society in the medieval period. The temple car seems to be a Cakadai or Cattattēr Tervidi (car street) also figures prominently in the Twin Epics which stands for the street in which temple car procession moves.

Introduction :

The temple car is an embodiment of gods and sacrifices. By exalting the position of gods and sacrifices, its cosmic symbolism is indicated. In structural designs and ritualistic aspects, the car is the symbolic of the cosmos. The fact that its structural outline from base to finial strikingly compares with the Buddhist Chaityas (halls of worship) proves its cosmic symbolism. The car is bulky in nature which is the characteristic of the earth. In the purana, Bhudevi (Mother Earth) is said to have served as the car to Siva in his war against the demons of Tripura. Tēr and ratha are the Tamil and Sanskrit words respectively which mean a car. The word Ter implies an elevated structure connected with the term terri which means high or elevated structure and that the phrase terri ambalam stands for an elevated mandapa (pavilion) or temple. In all Dravidian languages ter or teru is popular.

The Attur temple car is a wood carved one called vairather, seems to have derived its name from vairam (literally diamond, heart-wood) from which it was made. Since vairam was considered to be strong and keep thing made out of it away from whiteants and worms; it was generally preferred for making all kinds of domestic agricultural and technical implements. So the popular expression, vairam panja kattai (the wood permeated with diamond) was used to denote anything exceptionally strong. For making the axles, wooden beams and logs meant for carving icons, the heart-wood was used. So the car of Attur temple made of heart-wood was known as Vairatter and was also called cittiratter (the carved car) which came after the icons which were carved in the plinth of the car. Cittiram refers to the icons. Namalvar, one among the twelve Alvans, has the earliest reference to this phrase Kambar describes the car of Indrajit as cittirattēr. The similar type of ter is found in Attur which has a permanent fitting plinth containing wood carved images

The Someswarar temple car is significant in two respects, viz; (i) its architectural order which imitates the garbhagrha of the temple and its location (placement) in the temple complex. This temple car was a replica of the garbhagrha in architectural design. The constituent parts of garbhagrha viz; plinth, pada and vimana were brought out in the temple car. It has an elaborate plinth, consisting of ādhāra, upapitha, adisthāna and nārasana. The wheels in the vairatter of the Attur temple are solid. The wheels are attached to the axle at the nabhi or kudam (nave) point. The lynch-pin, called āni (nail), holds it closely attached to the axle. The rim is known as Patta or Vattai. The minute details relating to the measurements of the wheels are given in the Silpasastras. Its height is half the measure of the height of plinth. Depending upon the height and weight of the car, the diameter of the wheel extends from a minimum of 2'8" to a maximum of 10'2" from the smallest to the biggest cars. The rimi measures from a minimum of 6' to a maximum of 1'10". All the component parts of the wheel, including the wedge are made of wood. It is also enjoined by three or five kinds of wood to be employed for making the wheels.

The car of the temple, belonged to the 20th century one. The shape of the car is octagonal and the height is 12 feet. The length of the axle is 11 feet and contains 6 wheels. The measurement of

arc is 3 feet and the car has 5 pārs in all. The car height here stands for the height of plinth and not the total height of the car. The total height could be worked out by multiplying plinth height with 4. This is because the pāda and vimana are usually 1-2 and 2-3 times as tall as the plinth.

There are 126 iconographical specimens in the car. The specimens are located in the first row of the back side. Architecturally, the car has an octagonal frame work and an octagonal platform and is rectangular in shape. The adhithana and nārasana are designed octagonally. It has a vimana and the cuts are found both at the platform level and upto the level of adhithana and nārasana. For the upapitha, slight projections are provided in the centre of all the four sides. In the right and left sides, these projections are so arranged that they present the shape of an inverted pyramid, which at the summit are decked with rearing yalis on all four sides with images of gods in between them. Devakosthas lodging the images of gods, are also set up in the front and back of the first tier of the car.

Arrangement of Images

The upapitha, adhithana and nārasana are the depositories of images in the temple car. The devāsana and simhasana contain some sculptures. The Mānasara gives a list of images that are expected to be deposited in the temple car. They are lions, elephants, crocodiles, nātaka bhutas (dancing demons), yaksas, hooded serpents, Gurupāda (Brahma) Saroruha (Vishnu), Sanmukha Saraswati, Ganapati, the beloved of Sankara (Durga), the nude images of heavenly women, minor gods, kings, chiefs, priests, Brahmanas, bhaktas, dvarapalas (gate-keepers), Kinnāras, nāgās, Garuda and others. So Silpasastras have ordained the temple car to be the abode of iconography.

According to the Visvaakarma Vastusastra, all gods must be seated on their mounts. The Isvarasamhita, Sriprasanasamhita and Kumaratantra give clue to the various gods who are to be installed in the various parts of the temple car. These are mostly carved out of solid blocks of wood and affixed to the tiers with the use of ayaskila (iron nails). Each of these tiers of sculptures are usually bordered by a row of miniature sculptures at their base. The height of images in the main tiers differ from a minimum of 8 inches to a maximum of 2' feet, depending upon the height of the plinth. The miniature sculptures are at the most 6 inches in height. The axles are the lower most part of the temple car to lodge sculptures

. These sculptures are usually of the same number as the cross bars and affixed on the main axles, just below the cross bars. The images enshrined here are mostly those of bhuta ganas. Ganapati and Muruga are found among them in rare specimen. They are supposed to be the guardians of axles. In the Someswarar temple car the bhuta ganas are placed in the first tier of the car. The love making parrots are placed at pār edges in the Attur temple car.

The upapitha is the next member of the car which lodges images. Here the arrangement of images is done on a uniform pattern in all four sides without leaving any empty space. In rare cases sculptures are arranged sparsely. In the polygonal car the images

are arranged as alternated by brackets. At times a few sculptures are grouped together and enclosed by brackets. The brackets are mostly yalis, rearing horses, rearing lions, standing elephants and hooded serpents.

The Octagonal car (Attur car) has brackets only at the four corner. The busts of the images of Zoomorphic kūrma, Bhudevi and the hooded Ādisesa are lodged in the front centre at the base of the upapitha. The tails of kūrma and Adisesa and the feet of Bhudevi are lodged in the back side of the same tier. They are supposed to bear the weight of the car. The right and left sides of the upapitha are much hidden by the outer wheels. It is this concealed zone which provides the encampment for erotic sculptures. The nātakabhutas are lodged in the centre of these two sides. Yalippen (girls resting on yali) also find a place on both the extremities.

The adhisthana and nārasana enshrine sculptures in the same pattern as in the upapitha. A feature characteristic of the adhisthana is the arrangement of sculptures in slanting way which gives a pyramidal shape to it. In both the adhisthana and nārāsana also the images are bracketed. In the Someawarar temple car, the brackets are provided at the corners of the octagon. The adhisthana lodges iconographical specimen of a multitedious nature relating to Hindu mythology and the day-to-day life of the Hindus, their beliefs and customs. Some decorative aspects such as ornamental pillars, bud-like wooden bulbs, arches, metallic bells and the like are also lodged here.

The last member to lodge images is the pedestal. Images of dancing girls, instrument players, ācāryapurusas, astadikpalas and Gajalakshmi are in two tiers. In the car of the Someswarar temple, the first tier of the pedestal alone lodges sculptures. Here images are found very sparingly. The images carved in the temple car are out of solid blocks of wood. Generally, woods containing milky substance alone are preferred for making images. Such woods alone are expected to keep the longevity of images.

Silpasastras and agamas codify elaborate rules relating to the wood meant for iconic purposes and the methods for procuring them. The master craftman among silpis was called sthapati. He was assisted by sūtrāgrahi (surveyor), taksaka (sculptor) and vardhahin (builder or plasterer). Inscriptions refer to them as taccan and the remuneration due to them as taccāryakkani. All the artists worked in groups as directed by a sthapati.

REFERENCES :

1. Raju Kalidas, Temple Cars of Medieval Tamilaham, Tanjore, 1989, p. 5.
2. Samuel Beal (ed.), Travels of Buddhist pilgrims from China to India, NewDelhi, p.7.
3. Subramanyan, N., Pre-Pallavan Tamil Index, Madras, 1969, p. 459.
4. Tamil Lexicon, Madras, 1963, IV, pt.1, p. 2042.
5. Burrow, T., and M.B. Emerson, A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary, NewDelhi, 1972, p. 227.
6. Census Report of India, Tirunelveli, 1921, Madras 1928 p. 267.
7. Nalayiram Divya Prabandam, VIII, seventh, Ten, V. 3.
8. Kamba Ramayanam, VI, 18, V. 181.
9. Tirunagarapatalam, V. 64.
10. Mayamata Ch. 31, V. 29. (P.K. Acharya, Architecture of Mānasāra, V.V. 9-18, New Delhi, 1979.
11. Field study of the car dated 26-12-2017.
12. Acharya, P.K., (ed.), Architecture of Manasara Chap. 43, V.V. 59-62, NewDelhi 1979.
13. Players of pipes, lutes and drums. (P.K. Charya, op.cit., Vol.V., pp.163-64).
14. Stella Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple, Delhi, 1976, Vol. 2, P.9n.
15. Annual Report of Epigraphy 1909.No.188,