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CAR FESTIVAL OF SOMANATHESWARAR GOMATHIAMBAL TEMPLE AT AUTHOOR IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT OF TAMIL NADU - A STUDY

KEY WORDS: Car Festival, Ratha, Structure of the Ter or Ther,

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe the Car Festival of Somanatheswarar Gomathiambal Temple at Authoor in Thoothukudi District of Tamil Nadu. The Someswarar temple car is significant in 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 car festival was known as *Rathotsava* or *Rathayatra* (*Tertiruvila Terottam* in Tamil). In inscription the term *tiruter* or 'ter' itself stands for the car festival.

INTRODUCTION

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.

STRUCTURE OF THE CAR

The temple car seems to be a *Cakadai* or *Cattattēr Tervidi* (car street) also figures prominently in the *Twain Epics* which stands for the street in which temple car procession moves. 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 *vairater*, seems to have derived its name from *vairm* (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. 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 *linch-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.

Festivals

Festivals are annually celebrated in Somanatheswar temple at Authoor. Every Hindu temple in south India there are two icons for the deity. One is made of stone and fixed in the *grabhagraha* and the other is made of *Panchaloha* (an alloy of five metals consisting of gold, silver, copper, tin and brass). The *Panchaloha* idol is called *Utsavar* which means the icon meant for *festival*. In case of extra temple procession, the deity is taken on a huge *Rata* (temple-wooden car). This is called *Ratotsava* or *Brahmotsava*. The pageantry of the *festival* is not only an indication of its wealth but also the clarity and the presumed power of the deity in the edges of the common man. It must be said here that *festivals* can be taken as an indicator of the popularity of the temple. The highest propitiation to the gods was the procession in vehicles and *cars*. So it was hoped that good rains poured, good health prevailed and women gave birth to good children in a land where *rathanirmanā* (manufacture of cars) and *rathotsava* (car festival) were conducted.

Car Festival

The temple car was not just a monument of architectural and iconographical excellence. It was an institution deep-rooted in the socio-economic and religious traditions of the Indian society. As an institution, it acquired multi-dimensional character, encompassing the entire fabric of society, only in the medieval period. In the earlier phase of history it was not so. It had an evolutionary process of development, including the pre-historic roots of Indian culture, reaching the zenith under the Vijayanagar rulers around the 15th century AD. The car festival was known as *Rathotsava* or *Rathayatra* (*Tertiruvila Terottam* in Tamil). In inscription the term *tiruter* or 'ter' itself stands for the car festival. The detailed rules for conducting it are laid down in the *Isvarasamhita*, *Sriprasnasamhita* and *Kumarantra*. The concentration of a newly built car was known as *Ratapatishā* or *Rathasthapanā*. The mounting of the idol on the car was known as *Ratharohana*. Taking the *vadam* (rope) with a view to pull the car was known as *Tirutervada muhurttam*.

In the Someswarar temple, preparation for the car festival commences since the day of *dvajarahana* itself. On that day the high priests perform the *Kalnattu* (pillar planting) ceremony by planting a pillar on the pedestal of the car. It not only serves to arouse the festival spirit but also ensures a festival for the car. The

preparations for getting ready the car begin with this. The carved plinth of the car is cleared of dust and washed with a mixture of castor oil and buttermilk to get the cars neat and tidy. Wooden pillars are implanted on the pedestals. From above the pillar the bamboo frame work of the super structure is mounted. The *tercilai* (coloured cloth) is hung over the super structure. *Vadams* are fitted to the cars.

During the car festival, the car is decorated with golden bells, pearl garlands, tender leaves, curious portraits and clothes. *Plantain fruits*, *Kamuhu* (raw betelnut) and *coconut* are added here and there. Symbolically they proclaim the prosperity of the land. *Toranas* (ornamental uuuarch) of mango and *aracu* leaves are tied. Such a car having a golden initial and eagle flag were sanctified by sprinkling the holy water upon *Garuda* who symbolically represents the car and all the gods are offered worship. The deity is to be taken in procession in the car is offered *upacharas* (formalities) such as seeking the mirror and taking *tambalam* (betel leaves and areca nuts as a mark of respect). Then the processional images are taken in a vehicle to the car having undergone *dvapratistha*. As seated in the car, the deity is to be offered *puja*. Sugar pongal is offered. A mirror is shown near his face so as to allow him check up himself. *Harati* (waving camphor light) is done. All these *raja upacharas* (royal formalities) are done to please the deity. Then *vadam pidittal* takes place. The car is pulled through the four main streets of the town and brought back to its stand. *Harati* is done once again to the image after the car reaches the stand. With this the Rathotsava comes to an end.

The success of the car festival depends upon the process of taking the cars along the concourse. The mechanism of car operation is designed in a very simple manner, involving a difficult mode of operation. Its success to a great extent depends upon the condition of the car street and the car wheels. In the rainy season it is very difficult to move the cars since chances for entanglement of wheels in muddy meshes are frequent. On the eve of the festival, the wheels and axles checked and minor repairs done. At the time of *ratharohana*, the car pullers hold the *vadam* and pull them with all their might. Some men from behind the two outer back wheels apply a wooden lever called '*tadi*' with a view to push the wheel forward. As a result of both these forces, the standing car gives way and moves slowly. Since there is no automatic mechanism to arrest its movement while moving, some men run along as the front wheels by constantly applying a hurdle called *Kudil* (literally obstacle) across the wheels. This serves as a break and makes the car move slowly and steadily. The process works out well as long as the car moves in a straight road. In case it is to turn sidewise, trouble comes. Often big ones such as the car at Attur stand at corners for hours together, unable to turn sidewise.

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