

## **SAKTHI CULT IN TAMIL NADU: REFLECTIONS OF BENGAL TRADITION**

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### **Spiritual memoirs:**

The contact and contributions of Bengal spiritual personalities for the development of religious rites of Tamil Country are found documented in lithic records. It has already been established that number of Sivacharyas hailing from Bengal were appointed as Raj gurus by Chola emperors (R. Nagasway, 1999). When Chidambaram and later Chola temples were built, these Raja gurus were in charge of religious affairs of the Chola kingdom.

Tamil country was a centre for many such spiritual activities even during the Pallava period. The Pasupata sect lead by Lakulisa of kayavarohan travelled deep into the region and the temples in Nagapattianam and Kumbakonam better known as Nagai Karonam and Kudandai Karonam were such centres of such activities. Karonam is the Tamil from Kayavarohan.

On the other hand there are literary references of Kashmir Saivism's presence in centres like Chidambaram. Influences of Pratyabhijana Darsana in conceiving the Ananda Tandava form of Siva is presumed to be the creation of Kashmiri Saivaites (B.S.L Swamy, 1979). Inscriptional evidences prove their settlements in Chidambaram, Tiruvidaimarudur, and Srirangam in Tamil Nadu. Their contributions for the temple rituals are found in lithic records.

Yet another interesting Sanskrit composition Mahatsavavidhi by Aghora Sivacharya speaks about Suddha Saivism. It mentions about the presence of great preceptor Srikantha Siva Desika of Gouda desa (North Bengal) in Chola country during later Chola period (H. Sarkar; 1974). It is obvious that ancient Tamil country especially Chidambaram was a nerve centre of many such religious activities spearheaded by many schools of thought. Rather all such revelations entered the far south through Chidambaram.

In this context it is significant to trace the strong *tantric* tradition of Bengal which had its origin during 5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> CE. Both Brahminical and Buddhist were influenced by its popularity and the emphasis was given to rituals (Jayshree Sengupta 2010). Importance was given to female deities and it also absorbed latent folk practices like offering of animals, snake worship and magic. It was sought not only to placate deities but also to coerce them to give ordinary people the possibility of acquiring supernatural powers or Siddhies. *Tantra* in Bengal belongs to Kaalikula tradition while most of the *Tantras* of other regions belong to Srikula. It is no wonder that the rulers also sought such mystical powers to win over their enemies.



**Plate 47.1:** Thillai Kali.

*Tantric* practices might be the direct influence of East Indian tradition in Tamil Nadu. Cholas were particular in propitiating Kali in all their cities beginning from their early capital Uraiyyur. In Thanjavur the capital was founded only after the installation of Kali shrine known as Nisumbhasunari in the northern territory of the city.

The imperial Chola Empire begins with Vijayalaya Chola who is said to have defeated Mutharaiyars and his first act of conquest of Thanjai was the installation of the Nisumbhasunari

and lithic records praise her as he ruled the country by her grace. His conquest of the south and the extension of Power beyond the Seas in the east and penetration deep in to the gangetic plains was considered as the great Grace of Kali. It is an illustration of Kali of Chola period and this culture gained access to all the important towns of Chola country. We find such images installed in kilaiyur, Thiruvakkarai and other pilgrimage centres (R. Nagaswamy 1982).



**Plate 47.2:** Thillai Amman.

They also contributed for the construction of many temples dedicated to Kali more with *tantric* worship including the Thillai Kali in Chidambaram and Vakra Kali in Thiruvakkarai. Worship in these temples was not confining to the Agama mode but oriented towards the

Vamachara of East India. The Thillai Kali at Chidambaram has affiliations to the main Nataraja temple located not far away from this shrine. In accordance with the legend narrated in Koyil puranam a Tamil poem of medieval period Siva performed Ananda Tandava (Nataraja) for gracing two seers Patanjali and Vygrapada. On their request Siva continued his Tandava in the central shrine Cit Sabha (T. Satyamurthy 1978; Details in **Appendix 47.1**)

According to local legends, the counterpart of Siva Parvati challenged the great dancer Nataraja to win over her in presenting the *Tandava* form of dance and agreed to leave the city in case of defeat. The result of the contest ended with Parvati leaving the city and dwell in the territory of the city as ferocious Kali. She is called as Thillaivanam Udaiya Paramesvari in later Chola inscriptions.

The Thillai Kali temple in Chidambaram as on today has got two shrines with sala sikhara Vimanas. Thillai Kali shrine faces east and is located at the north western corner of the inner complex and Thillai Amman shrine faces west and occupies the central part of the premises. Thillai Kali shrine is only a rectangular sanctum without ardhmandapa and other precincts of the south Indian temple complex. Even the pranala over the Kumudavari is missing and the front ankana of the Thillai Amman temple forms the front mandapa, but without any axial conformity. This ankanas seems to be added later and other axial units like Bali pita and usual Simha in front are missing.

The image inside under worship is in all respects similar to Nisumbhasunari of Thanjavur style, but it is difficult to identify the attributes in hands due to accretions. Rituals in the sanctum are altogether different from all other agama or vaidic mode of worships that are prevalent in the region. Sprinkling of water over the image is totally shunned away. The main Image of Kali is anointed with oil (Gingely) only and Vermilion (kum kum) is spread throughout her body and adored with white cloth. In all respects she resembles the Kali of Bengal and the angry look is indicative of the *ugra* (wrath) forms of Devi (**Plate 47.1**).

The main shrine of Thillai Amman facing west is a rectangular *sala sikhara* with an ardhmandapa in front. It carries deva koshtas in three main sides of the vimana and ardhmandapa. The main deity is seated with four heads and four arms, holding Akshamala and Sula in the upper hands and *panapatra* and lotus in the lower arms. A peculiar character of this image is that she had four heads and is called as Brahma Chamundi as the Panapatra (Kapala) held in right hand indicates such aspect. In all respects she is soumya (Benevolent) (**Plate 47.2**) (R. Nagaswamy 1982).

None of the terrific aspect is portrayed as she wears jatamukuta and all the four faces and eyes are in tranquil (Santi) look. In spite of the fact that this shrine has got an open prakara, there is no flag mast indicating that the festivities in the temple are in no way connected to this Amman (Devi). All other rites in this shrine are done in Vedic mode as in the main Nataraja temple and the priest is also one among the priests of Sri Nataraja temple.

Nevertheless two aspects draw our attention to understand the benign and horrific aspects of Devi in the same temple premises. The annual festival of the temple is associated with the Kali only and the principle priest during that occasion is a tribal chief of the local population and he leads all procession and other rituals. Annual festival is reported to end on the no moon day of Vaishakh (Solar month coinciding with Vaishakh/April-May) with the offering of Animals for pacifying the rage of the Kali. In fine the festival and other rituals hold latent practices of tribal cult.

Further the *utsavabhera* (processional deity) of the festival, the bronze under worship is datable to 11<sup>th</sup> CE and it is seated in *bhadrasana* over a lotus motif. The upper two arms in *kataka* pose without emblems. The main right hand holds *Kapala patra* and the left is in the form of *katka*. She is portrayed with one head wearing *Jatamaklutya*. Below her hanging right hand is the preta lying flat. This rare representation of Kali in soumya form and is named as Thillai Vanam Udaya Paramesvari.

In all probability the original deity Kali and the present bronze were there before the construction of the temple with two separate deities and had different conventions of worship; one Vaidika and other local tribal customary practices. In this context it is worth analyzing the lithic records available in the temple. The temple in the present form was constructed during the reign of Koperuncinga, a turbulent Pallava chieftain in the middle of 13<sup>th</sup> CE (Annual Report on Epigraphy 403/1903).

It is pertinent to mention here that from the time of Kulotunga I, (1070-1120) there were remarkable growth in Chidambaram. It was a great period of development of Devi worship in Chola country. His conquests over the Kalinga country and eastern India and close observance of the religious practices there made him to revive Devi worship in Chola mandalam. It is more so in the case of Chidambaram. It was a great period in the history of Sivakami temple in Chidambaram (R. Nagaswamy 1982). A commander named Naraloka vira under him and later under his son Vikrama Chola made several valuable gifts to Sivakami Amman temple. His extensive gifts and other structural expansions within the temple are assigned to the construction of the devi shrine and hundred pillared mandapa in the third Prakara (T. Satyamurthy 1978). His contributions are recorded in Sanskrit and Tamil verses in inscriptions in Chidambaram temple. They are nearly hundred verses and he made many images including Portrait sculptures. Among them Nagaswamy draws our attention to one metal portrait of a person named as Bhattacharya.

The Sanskrit version runs as “He installed the icon of the world renowned Bhattacharya, who was the worshipper of the auspicious icon (of Ananda Tandava), and had defeated in debates with the adherents of non-Vedic cults, and his image is immense joy to the world”.

It is well clarified that Naralokavira set up an image of Bhattacharya, who was the chief person of Brahmana Kula and who had on former occasion defeated the adherents of religions

outside the Vedic lore and established the Saiva religion on the earth (South Indian Temple Inscriptions 1320, 1957).

The significance of the lithic record is that the movement of eliminating non-Vedic and adversary cult activities were initiated by Bhattacharya hailed from Bengal. This trend continued till the end of Chola rule and his successors also followed the movement in discarding the non Vedic practices. In fact the rulers who succeeded were particular in strictly following the sermons of Bhattacharya.

The Pallava chieftain Kopercinga, under whom the Chidambaram region was annexed made a reference (1262 CE) of Gonguli Isvara Siva of Savarna Gotra hailing from Dakshina Radha in Uttirapata. Probably he was a resident of Chidambaram and it attests the continuation of the Seers from Bengal for a long time.

For our present study, it is important that the Thillai Kali Temple was constructed by Kopercinga, probably under the guidance of the advice of Gonguli Isvara Siva who is contemporary to this ruler. In this course of action that continued, he installed the Thillai Amman (Devi) in a soumya form. The Kali temple became part of the new temple within the inner *prakara* and the worship mode was vaidic and not *tantric* as in the case of Thillai Kali. The Kali shrine that existed and consecrated during early Chola, if not earlier than that continued to be under worship in *tantric* cult. The seemingly gap between Vedic and non Vedic factions were bridged dramatically under the influence of Bengal seers settled in Chidambaram.

It is noteworthy that the traditions set by Kopercinga under the guidance of Gonguli are continuing even today and two conflicting factions are harmonized each other in the same premises.

### Appendix 47.1

#### Legends:

Literary works like Chidambara Mahatmya in Sanskrit and Koyil Puranam in Tamil take the sanctity of the shrine back to the time of Patanjali, the author of *Yogasutra* of second century B.C. The Tamil work of Tirumandiram pushes the antiquity of the shrine to 5<sup>th</sup> B.C.E. With the various versions in different Puranas, the legend that is commonly accepted is put forth here.

In Darukavana, (Forest) the heretics were full of pride and much elated at their profound learning indulging only in sacrifice refusing the existence of God. Siva in order to suppress their pride took the disguise of Bhiksatana (a Mendicant). He was escorted by Vishnu as *Mohini*. The *Rsis* were infatuated by the beauty of *Mohini*, while their *patnies* (wives) followed Siva totally abandoning their hermitages. Soon the *RSIS* came to know the disguise and the trick played by Siva. They raised an Abicara Homa (witchcraft) to destroy the intruders. A fierce tiger emerged from the fire, which was seized by Siva. He further peeled off its skin with the nails of his finger and wrapped it around himself as lower garment. Then an antelope and a serpent were sent against Siva, which Siva held them as ornaments in his hand and neck respectively.

Finally they sent against him utilizing all their ascetic powers, a monstrosity in the form of a black dwarf – an Apasmarapura-Muyalaka. On this dwarf Siva placed his sacred foot keeping him writing on the ground and danced a Blissful Glorious dance, which was witnessed by all the Gods and Devas. In fine, the *Rsis* were subdued they realized their faults and became His devotees.

In due course Vishnu narrated the delight of the dance he witnessed in Darukavana to Adishesha. He (Adishesha) with Vishnu's consent practiced penance and prayed to Siva for a sight of the dance. In turn, Siva vouchsafed to perform the same "Ananda Tandava" at Thillai forest. Adishesha took birth as Patanjali on the earth and in the company of Vyagharapada, awaited the advent of Lord Siva for his dance. They both consecrated their individual *Asrama* and Sivalingas besides worshipping Siva as the Mulasthana Linga in the Thillai Forest.

The episode of Vyagharapada runs as follows. He was the son of Madhyandina *Rsi* living on the banks of the Ganges. During his pilgrimage towards the south, he found the shrine of Svayambhu Sivalinga (self manifested) under a banyan tree near a tank. A rejuvenating bath in the tank and the divinity of the linga inspired him and he decided to practice penance there to behold the dance of Siva.

His devotion went to the extent of offering flowers duly plucked before the honey particles were collected by the bees. He found it difficult soon to continue the vow as in the early hours of the dawn; the legs and hands were too slippery to climb the trees to pluck the flowers. As his devotion was intense, he was endowed with the boon of getting the tiger's feet and claws to carry out his vow and the tiger's eye with which he could see even in the dark. Hence he was named as Vyagharapada (Tiger legged). On a *taipusya* (full moon day in January and February) fixed by Siva early, the Ananda Tandava – the dance of Bliss was performed by Siva in Thillai in the presence of Sivakami Sundari his consort and all the Gods, the Devas and two devotees. At the end of the dance Siva granted a boon to the devotees by which they sought his continuance of the mystic dance in Thillai forest and the place of the dance became Ambalam or Sabha and the Lord Sabhanayaka.

According to Pundarika Mahatmya, the *cit sabha* is for the worship of Siva in His Aakasik ethereal form invisible to human eyes, but pervading throughout the universe.

According to the kovil puranam a poem in Tamil of Umapati Sivacharya, Simha Varman II (550-575 A.D) reached Thillai forest during his voyage, took bath in the Siva Ganga tank and to his surprise found his skin disease cured. Chidambara Mahatmya names Simha Varman as Hiranyavarman and speaks about his company with Patanjali and Vyagharapada. Being inspired by the shrine and holy tank he caused the earliest temple to be erected and the said tank to be renovated. The tree Thillai (*Excoecaria – Agallocha*) has been accepted generally as the holy tree associated with this temple ( *sthala vrksa* ). Historically no such inscriptions are left in the temple. However we can safely conclude that the construction of the main shrine (*cit-sabha*) as the contribution of early Pallavas as still the archaic form is retained here. Probably being an inspired shrine rather an institution during the period of Chola dynasty, the shrine has been renovated and additional structures added resulting in the annihilation of the early records.

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