



POOJAS AND FESTIVAL ARTHANAREESWARA TEMPLE IN TIRUCHENGODU

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The performance of Nitya pooja during Kala Sandhi, Uccikkalam and Sayaratchi, Erandamkalam and Ardhamam are performed in the Arthanareeswara temple according to the Saiva Agamas. In Arthanareeswara Temple, daily pooja are performed three times a day from Morning to Evening. This pooja includes Abishekam, Alankaram and Deeparadhana.¹

Go-Pooja

Go-pooja is being performed daily with kappi-rice as Neivedyam to a cow owned by the Devasthanam, after bathing and adorning it with saffron and yellow turmeric powder, by the side of the Nandi. After the completion of the Go-puja with deeparadhana the said Neivedyam is given to that cow.²

Kalasantidhi Pooja

It is conducted between in 8.00 am. It is only during kalasantidhi both Alankaram and aradhanas are being performed to all the deities in this temple. During this kalam plainly cooked rice is offered. The kalasantidhi pooja ends with the Deeparadhana to Nandi.³

Uchikkala Pooja

During this puja abluion is held only to the presiding deity, Kritivasar, Balangurambal and Palipeedam. The Uchikkala Pooja conducted in 12 noon and concludes with milk Abishekam and Arthanareesawara deeparadhana due to incident in this temple the past ten years. The temple is kept closed immediately after Uchikkala pooja before pm.⁴

Sayaratchai Pooja

During the Sayaratchai pooja 5pm abluion is being performed only to the presiding deities instead of pongal, as food offering. The Sayaratchai pooja comes to a close with the mere deeparadhana puja to all the deities.⁵

Performance of the Pooja

The performance of the Poojas to the deities in the respective shrine was followed from the early period in the Kongu region. Inscriptions at Tiruchchengodu, Tirumuruganpundi, Avinasi, Bhavani, Venjamankudalur, Karur and Kodumudi attest the fact that the Pooja and festivals were performed in a grand manner.⁶ The temple inscriptions state that the Lord Siva Brahmanas and hereditary Gurukkal were employed in the temple to perform Pooja. Commonly Pooja are of three types namely Nitya Pooja (daily worship), Naimittika Pooja (occasional worship)-the worship once in a week or once in fifteen days and Kamyapuja (Special Pooja). Daily Pooja have been performed in the temple from an early period. The records mention that the patrons encouraged daily Poojas in the temples according to the Agamas. The priests who were appointed to conduct the Pooja performed them regularly. There are inscriptional evidences to prove that a few devotees arranged for the food offerings to the deities by making gifts in the form of Lands, Panam, endowment of Pon, in all the seven Saivaite temples. The devotees were very particular to supply oil for the lamps kept before the Gods and Goddesses.⁸ They belonged to different categories and donated Coins, Panam and Pon for sandhi lamp and perpetual lamp for the Gods and Goddesses in the Saivaite temples. Gifts in the form of villages were offered by the devotees to meet out the expense towards sacred bath and also for embellishing the deities with sandal paste. The same donation is continued even today in all the temples by the devotees for various forms of worship. Pooja are performed four times or three times in all the Lord Siva temples according to Karana and Kamika Agamas. These Gurukkals should duly initiate with Sivadhikshai and Acharyabishigam to do the Pooja.⁹

Besides daily worship of god, there are some special occasions or festival days where the deity in the temple is worshipped more ceremoniously on a grand scale. Some inscriptions and other evidences confirm that no month passed without a festival. A record from Tiruchchengodu during the 26th regnal year of Parantaka I (933 A.D.) speaks about Tiruvadira (Arudra) festival in the temple by feeding the Brahmanas by a special body called the Tiruvadira Ganapperumakkal. In the 27th regnal year (934 A.D.) of Parantaka I in the temple of Tiruchchengodu and endowment was made by Kukari Sundari, a native of Pugaliyur, for feeding the Brahmanas on the days of Duvadasi through the agency of Duvadasi Ganapperumakkal. Another inscription of the 28th year of Parantaka I (935 A.D.) mentions about the gift of 3 kalanju of gold for feeding the Brahmanas from out of its interest (Palisai) on Devadasi, Tiruvadira and Tiruvonam every month. Another inscription belonging to the 14th regnal year of Raja Raja I (999 A.D.) registers an endowment of 20 kalanju of gold for feeding 20 Brahmanas on the day



of Arudra festival every month by Muri Kamakkanar, the wife of Ilangonadigal on behalf of a person named Ekavira Divakaradevar.¹⁰

An inscription belonging to the 13th and 14th regnal years of Raja Raja I, at Tiruchchengodu, mentions about feeding the Brahmanas on Ekadesi days. The 20th year of Rajendra I inscription records the gift of kalanju of gold to the deity Tirumalayil Elundaruliya Udaiyar at Tiruchchengodu for various offerings during Uttarayana Sankranti festival. Another inscription from Kodumudi in the 27th regnal year of Vira Narayana Ravi Varma (a feudatory of Kulottunga) records the tax free gift of the village Unjalur in Melkara Araiya Nadu of Adhirajaraja Mandalam. The income from the same was allotted to Lord Tirupandikkodumudi Mahadeva at Karaiyur in Kaveri Nadu, a sub division of Adhirajaraja Mandalam to meet expenses of offerings, worship and celebrating the monthly natal star of the king and the grand festival (Magham) in the month of Masi. From the same place undated records of the Kongu Pandya king, Vira Sundara Pandya records a gift of villages for the Masi Magham festival for the sacred bath, food offerings, anointment and other services. Another inscription from Kodumudi registers an order of the king granting revenue of 30 Pon to meet the expenses of worship, offerings and various other expenditures that incurred during the special festival in the month of Masi.¹¹

Another inscription during the 24th year of Kulottunga Chola Deva III from Karuvur registers the tax free gift as Iraiylil Devadana to meet the expenses on the special festival Tiruk-karthigai. A copper plate inscription from Tiruchchengodu during the period of Krishnaraja Udaiyar records the agreement among the people of 18th villages for meeting the expenses of the Karthigai festival. An inscription from Tirumuruganpundi belonging to the Kongu Chola king Vira Rajendra Deva registers the gift of money by Vanarayadevan, for food-offerings to be made on the days of Sivaratri festival.

Chittirai Festival

At present the following festivals are celebrated in all the Chittirai Lord Siva temples: The annual festival in the month of Chittirai is celebrated in a grand manner in the Arthanareeswara temples even today. The festival celebrated in the Tamil month of Chittirai (April-May) in Avinasi is the most important one. Generally the first day in the month of Adi is known as Thalai Adi and the 18th day of this month which is known as Adipperukku or Adi Paddinettu are celebrated.¹²

Skanda Sasti Festival

In all the Lord Siva temples in Tamil Nadu where there are the shrines of Lord Muruga, the sixth day of Skanda Sasti festival is celebrated with grand manner. It is unique to note that the people who have no children believe that god will bless them with a child if they adhere to Skanda Sasti fasting. It must be remembered here that a total fasting will set right physiological imbalances and that will enhance the possibilities of conceiving.

Karthigai Festival

The Karthigai star in the Tamil month Karthigai (November-December) is celebrated in all the Hindu houses. This Tirukkarthigai festival is celebrated for two days. In the first day they light (Ahal Vizhakku) small lamps in the temples. In the second day the front yard (Vasal) of the houses of the Hindus are decorated with a number of (Deepams) lamps made up of clay with a bonfire called Chokkappanai, thus Karthigai festival comes to an end. In the Arthanareeswara temple the function is observed by keeping a big lamp lit in front of the temple and is known as Karthigai Jothi. People believe that by lighting the lamps the obscurity and darkness in their minds and life can be eliminated with the blessings of the Almighty.

Tiruvadhirai Festival

The records of the Kongu region mention the festival of Tiruvadhirai. Tiruvadhirai is the asterism associated with Lord Siva. This festival is observed in the month of Margazhi (December-January) when the Asterism Arudhra holds sway. The occasion is favorable to propitiate Lord Arthanareeswara by worshipping him. This festival is celebrated in all the Siva temples in Kongu Nadu in a befitting manner. Tiruvadhirai is celebrated grandly even today at Tiruchengodu. This festival is popularly known in the Tamil country as Arudhra the Asterism going by the name of Arudhra as its presiding deity Rudra symbolizing the destructive force in the universe. It was on this auspicious day ladies in different age groups observed Tiruvadhirai Nonbu to gain the grace of Lord Arthanareeswara.

Even now women go on fasting for a whole day on Tiruvadhirai. They end this fasting after providing a 'Padaiyal' offering to Ganapati with powdered raw rice mixed with sugar and a piece of yellow thread. Men take this to the temple of Ganapati and return after performing puja with this offering. After their return women folk come out to see the full moon, end their fasting around 7 pm., then they remove the worn out yellow thread round their neck and wear a new one to be replaced next year. This is also an occasion for a get together of one's kith and kin. Instead of celebrating Tiruvadhirai in every house, the young couples gather in a particular house whose head or house wife may be related to them in some way or other. They disperse



after getting the blessings of the elderly people. This is supposed to bring in good health to their husbands and make them united for a longer spell.

Vaikundaekadesi

Vaikundaekadesi is celebrated in a grand manner in Tiruchchengodu, Kodumudi and Bhavani where the temples have shrine for Lord Perumal. During Vaikundaekadesi, the Tiruchchengodu people assembled in the shrine of their family deity and worshipped together. This has become a traditional form of worship. Further it indicates the fusion between the all India pantheon and a local folk deity. Thus in the Tiruchchengodu region religious festivals serve as a basis for cultural synthesis. Many of the Lord Siva temples Thaiposam of this region have shrines for Lord Subramanya. So the celebration of Thaiposam is a note-worthy one among the people in Tiruchchengodu.¹³

Pongal Festival

Pongal is celebrated on the first day of the Tamil month Thai (January- February). It is also known as Makara Sankranti. The Tamil term Pongal festival indicates that the newly harvested rice is cooked first. The preparation goes by the name of Pongal where the rice boiled with milk. It is generally cooked in the front-yard of the house. The Tamil word Pongu means boil. Hence the rice cooked is known as Pongal. Lord Arthanareeswara is said to have been pleased by the offering on Pongal day.¹⁴ People light a lamp filled with ghee. There is a custom of lighting two lamps on Sankranti day, one fed with oil and the other with ghee, and it is believed to be the Sankranti-Virata-Deepa-Dhyapanam to reach Lord Siva or Lord Vishnu after death. By this mode of worship people thank the Sun God, their family deity, ancestors and others. In some quarters it is known as Suryan Nonbu i.e., a festival to thank Sun God for having blessed the farmers with a rich harvest.

Maha Sivaratri Festivals

Maha Sivaratri is an important festival for the Saivaites and it is highly celebrated all the Siva temples in Tamil Nadu in the Tamil month of Masi (February-March) in Tiruchchengodu. Maha Sivaratri is celebrated in grand manner. According to Puranas, Goddess Parvathi in order to protect the living souls worshipped Lord Siva on that night and hence, it is called 'Maha Sivaratri'. This festival has existed from early period.

There are five Sivaratris in a year. They are the Maha Sivaratri, Yoga Sivaratri, Nitya Sivaratri, Paksha Sivaratri and Maha Sivaratri respectively. The Sivaratri night is to be divided into four equal parts (jamam) and each jamam is to be worshipped differently. Lord Siva is worshipped with lotus flowers, vilva leaves and lily flowers. Sweet Pongal, Sweet Payasam, Salted Pongal and pure cooked rice are the offerings made to the deity. People observe strict Vradha (fasting) from the previous day. They go to the Lord Siva temples and also visit the shrines of their family deities. They believed that the observance of fasting without sleep would redeem them from any sin committed knowingly or unknowingly. The following Lord Siva temples considered especially holy worship for Lord Siva on Maha Sivaratri nights are those at Tiruvaikavur near Papanasam, Omampuliyur near Vaitheeswaran Koil, Srisasilam and Kalahasti. Maha Sivaratri is considered to be the most favourable day to get the blessings of Lord Siva.¹⁵

Girivalam

After the famed Thiruvannamalai, the most visited pilgrimage spot in the south, where Devotees gather for Girivalam is none other than in Thiruchengode. Girivalam has been an age old practice followed in Thiruchengodu from times immemorial. Specifically on the 6th Festival of the Grand Vaigasi Visagam celebration, it is found customary for the revered Ammaiappar to go on a Girivalam along with the lords of the divine family. This custom of going for the Girivalam has been taking place every month continuously for the past 25 years. Every month during Pournami, 50 thousand to 1 lakh devotees gather to go on the Girivalam. Circling path covers around 7 kms. It takes normally 1 1/2 hours to cover the distance. One who thinks Arthanareeswara and desire to start circling the Arthanareeswara hill and forwarding one foot will get equal benefit of Yagam and for second foot he will achieve the benefit of Raja suya Yagam and with clear mind of third foot will achieve Aswamedha Yagam and who continues further will get beneficial of all Yagams.¹⁶

Highlights of the Steps

The first step of the mountain pathway starts at the place where Gajamukha Pillayar is in south and Aarumuga swamy in the north. This place is called the base of the mountain (Malai Adivaaram). Passing through the stairway, we arrive at the Sengundhar Mandapam, and then at the Kaalathisuvaamigal Mandapam, Thirumudiyar Mandapam, and finally arrive at the Thaili Mandapam. To the west of Thaili Mandapam, there is a Nandhi, 7 feet wide and 4feet high, facing the Gopuram tower. The part called as pasuvan kovil, place which is behind this is known as Naagamalai.¹⁷



Panguni Uttiram Festival

Panguni Uttiram (March-April) is one of the most important festivals to the people of Kongu and Namakkal region as many of the village people involved in it with commitment and devotion. It is celebrated for ten days. As a festival of folk tradition, maximum number of village people participates in it. Singing of folk songs, Kavadiattam and folk music are the common features of this festival. This is celebrated during the full moon day of the Tamil month Panguni (April-May). It reminds the seasonal changes. Spring season brings brightness to the land. There is a reference to Panguni season in Tiruthakkadeva's 'Jeevaka Chinthamani'. It is during this season the celebration of celestial marriage between deities Siva and Parvathi takes place. The fasting undertaken is known as Kalyana Nonbu. The priests fix the Uttiram day as an auspicious occasion for the marriage of Siva and Parvathi.

Thus these Tiruchengodu temple festivals paved the way for social harmony among different classes of people. The devotees expressed their devotion by engaging in folk art such as Kavadi, Karagam and Kummi. Women also participated in the celebrations. The festivals of this region, from very early times, were related to the temples allied to religious sentiments. As the people were involved in agriculture which involved continuous toil, they needed rest and joy. The festivals were a kind of relaxation for them. From the Tamil New Year day upto the Uttiram festival in the month of Panguni, many festivals were celebrated in the Kongu Namakkal, Salem and Tiruchengodu region. During certain festivals there was only a small gathering, but during religious festivals a lot of devotees, even from outside of Kongu Nadu participated. Hence, these festivals throw light on the cultural heritage of this region.

Car Festival

The most important festival is the annual chariot festival of the Sengottuvelavar temple, which occurs for 14 days in the month of Vaikasi. The special feature of the festival is that four separate chariots are used to carry the processional deities through the streets. The first chariot carries Lord Ganesh, the second Sengottuvelavar (Murugan), the third is used for Arthanareeswara and the last for Adikeshava Perumal (Vishnu). These chariots are also of considerable historic importance: the largest that of Arthanareeswara was donated to the temple by Nagamalai Gouder in 1699, the chariot of Sengothuvevar was donated by Chennaraja Chikendar in 1628 and the remaining two were made by Kondabhupathi, the ruler of Kongunadu, in 1628.¹⁸

The Tamil word for festival is Vizha (vizhavu). This arises from the root, vizhal, to desire and love; the noun means, the thing desired, the object celebrated. So when the narrow love expands, it expresses itself in the form of festivals and celebrations.¹⁹ Festivals are fountains of joy for all. They exist in all countries, in all levels of society, in all races, and had been through all the ages.²⁰ If man has been described as a social animal, festivals are the occasions for a close joyous coming together for the members of the social group, and they give full expression to the social instinct. Festivals seem to be universal. They have been natural to man at all claims, in the past and present.²¹

Notes and References

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