
MANIFESTATION OF NAGASWARA IN THE IMAGES AND RITUALS OF SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLES

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “*Kshethra*” in ancient India was that of a place for education and development of intellectual and cultural faculties of man in addition to worship of god. True to this idea, even today, temples in India especially the ones in southern part of this country are considered as the seat of culture and knowledge. The creation of temple was the result of man’s desire to present God in a human form. The materials with which temple is built are rock, sand, stone and human efforts. Sculptures, icons, etc., plays the role of anatomical representation of human form as an image or symbol. Students of art and culture in general and those of music and dance in particular, will find the role of temples in preserving various arts and science and also their role in propagating various art forms worth studying. Music is also a necessary ingredient in many of the services in the temples. In addition, the art and artefacts of temple’s iconography and painting in temples carry valuable information on music. Many of the inscriptions on stone and metals available in temples carry abundant information about various art forms, especially music and musicology.

Musical instruments are galore and dance postures held in open – air classes conveying inspiration and lessons to the delight of the viewers, connoisseurs and the devotees. These sculptures are the living testimony to the spirit of the age and clearly show the development of these fine arts as time progressed. They bear testimony to the traditions and culture and reflect the character and interests of the people. It also shows the dedication of the rulers of those periods in promoting music and their devotion to the deities. The performance of music and dance in the temple rituals had special significances. The present paper titled “*MANIFESTATION OF NAGASWARA IN THE IMAGES AND RITUALS OF SOUTH INDIAN TEMPLES*” explores, the *Nagaswara* in ritualistic as well as sculptural aspects preserved in South Indian Temples. The study is confined to the contribution in the states Kerala and Tamil Nadu of South India.

KEY WORDS

Nagaswara, Mantapa, Garbhagriha, Divyasesam, Mallari

INTRODUCTION

Temples of South India have played an important role in the preservation and development of music. The arts of music and dance have been illustrated on stone and in the structure of the temple Gopuras and *Prakaras*, Walls, and *mantapas* by sculptures and paintings is a proof beyond doubt of the sacredness of the art. The sculptural richness of the temple reflects the musical spirit of the age, the wide popularity of the arts and dance and its advanced stage of development. The ancient temples following the *Agamic* rituals over thousands of years have developed particular traditions and special offerings peculiar to each. The *sthala keerthanas* are musical composition in praise of the presiding deities of the various shrine composed by great *Vaggeyakaras* who were devout *Bhakthas* of God.

South Indian temples served the purpose of educational institutions in the old days is supported by inscriptions engraved on the walls of several temples and annual reports of epigraphy department. According to these reports, which contain abundant information on the subject, these institutions not only fulfilled social and religious needs, but also that of education. The daily and festival rituals in the temples in South India resonate with the sound of the *Nagaswaram*. There are many conventions and traditions relating to the playing of the *Nagaswaram* on various occasions in temples. The inscriptions belonging to the *Vijayanagara* dynasty are important from the point view of the history of Indian Music. A record incised in the reign of *Sadasivadeva Maharaja* of the *Vijayanagara* dynasty refers to the *Nagaswaram* players. The inscription is dated *Saka-Samvat* 1474 corresponding to A.D. 1552. The record registers the gift of a village to a piper, for playing on two *Nagaswaras* and two drums (*Tavil* or *Dolak*) in the Temple of *Vasantha Mallikarjuna* at *Devalpura*. From the foregoing reference to the *Nagaswaram* in epigraphy and literature, it is clear that the instrument had its birth sometime in 15th century A.D.¹

REPRESENTATION OF NAGASWARA IN IMAGES AND IDOLS

The sculptures and paintings offer important visual information on the morphology of musical instruments as well as on the performance practice and context. These Temples prove to be an indispensable repository of the iconographic representations of music culture, with literally thousands of specimens containing a wealth of information. The study of artistic representation, by understanding individual characteristics of an image or icon, is called Iconography. In the aspects of musical iconographies, the depiction of musical instruments or the sculptures of musicians were parts seen in the temple precincts. South Indian temples have a vast number of musical instruments depicted in its sculptures and paintings. There are two types of sculptures of musicians and musical instruments in the temples. The musical instrument held as an attribute to the sculpture is the first category. The sculptures of musicians with or without musical instruments are the second category. The sculptures of music and musical instruments are mostly carved as part of temple architecture. The sculptures are mainly on pillars, ceilings of the pillared halls, *Gopuras*, basement of the pillared hall and

so on. Murals are mainly seen on the walls of *GarbhaGriha*, ceilings of pillared halls. Individual sculptures form part of bronze figures, wooden bracket figures, and monolithic images. In some temples, processional deity is decorated with some musical instrument like *Vina* and flute. Most of the pillars of the Temples have depiction of dance and musical sculptures. The various episodes from *Puranas* and also the ruling dynasties images were also seen on the pillars. When the Temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, *Dasavataras* are carved in its pillars. In Siva Temple, various episodes from *Siva Purana* like, *Nataraja* Forms, *Tripurantaka* forms, *Vinadhara Dakshinamurthi*, *Kiratarjuneeyam* etc. are mostly carved. Images of wind instruments are very common in South Indian Temples. Most prominent one is Flute; mostly flute is associated with Lord *Krishna*. We can see Lord *VenuGopala* in the form of two, six, and eight hands in Temple's pillars. Monolithic *Venugopala* sculpture with eight hands holding a flute is depicted in AzhakarKoyil in Madurai District of Tamil Nadu. *Nagaswara* images are installed in *Kailasanatha* Temple and *PavizhaVannar* Temples in *Kancheepuram*. One of the pillars of *Darasuram* Temple its *Mantapa* has a depiction of Lord *Siva* playing a *Nagaswara* with legs crossed. Although much weatherworn, one can see the deity holding the antelope and axe in the upper left and right hands respectively with the lower hands holding *Nagaswara*, and two *Sivaganas* dancing joyously on either side. Images of *Nagaswara* depicted as murals were seen in Omallur Temple – Kerala.

Different types of *Nagaswaras* preserved in temples

There are two well-known varieties of *Nagaswaram*. One is the hallowed *Tiruvarur Bari*. The pitch is correspondingly lower and somewhat near two *Kattai*. The conventional variety is the *Timiri*, much shorter and thinner in size and capable of shrill notes near five *Kattai* to catch the ears of distant devotees. The *Timri Nagaswaram* can be found in most famous *Vaishnava* temples like Srirangam and Tiruvananthapuram. The *Mukha Vina* is a diminutive *Nagaswaram* whose range is limited to a few octaves. The *Mukha Vina* was an important religious item in *Vaishnavite* as well as Siva temples. This instrument is still used in Kapaleeswara Temple in its festivals. One of the *Mukha Vina* is exhibited in the Tiruvarur Temple Museum. The big pipe *Tutti* drones the *Sruti*. It is heartening to note that the *Mukha Vina* continues to be in active service in Kerala even if in a subordinate role of an accompaniment. The stone *Nagaswaram* would seem to be the common ancestors of all. It is still used in the *Sreevaikuntam* and *Alwar Tirunagari* (both are in Tirunelveli District) in Tamil Nadu. And from Kerala we can see stone *Nagaswaram* in Omallur Shasthan Kotta, Ettumanur – Mahadeva Temple, Vaikkom – Mahadeva Temple in Kottayam District and Sri Ananthapadmanabha Swami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. The remarkable specimen of musical pipe scooped out of granite stone is seen in the temple at Shanbaharamanallur in Thirunelveli district. This pipe is situated in the southwest corner of the Sanctum Sanctorum. The pipe is conical in shape and is in the center of the pillar. The pipe is slightly inclined to

the horizontal. The interior of the pipe is smooth and polished. The two ends of the pipe are circular in shape. When blown from one end, the tone of a conch is heard. The length of the pipe is one foot. The pipe has two small folds inside and this probably accounts for the difference in tone when blown from the two ends. The frequencies of the notes heard from the two ends bear the *Samvadi* relationship. When two people blow the pipe from either end alternately, the effect is pleasant.

Role of Nagaswara In Temple rituals

From the time the temple opens early in the morning till it closes at mid-night, *Nagaswaram* is played at every ritual. *Nagaswaram* is very loud and it can be heard from a long distance. So, though one may not be listening particularly to the music, it falls on one's ears and reminds one that a particular activity is going on in the temple. The schedule of systematic organized way of playing *Raga* alerts the people that some deities are taken in procession along the streets and the particular *Ragas* remind the people what they are expected to do. Finally when the deity goes to *Palli-arai* (bed Chamber) *Neelambari* (corresponds *Pann* is *Megha raga Kurunchi*) is played. *Isai Vellalars* is the caste or community of people who have devoted themselves to the art of dancing and also in use of *Nagaswara* and *tavil*, particularly in temples in Tamil Nadu. The term *Isai Vellalar* means a cultivator of music. The music of *Thiruppalliezhuchi* in *Bhupalam Raga* is played in all *Vaishnava Divyadesams* in early morning. *Bhupalam* is *Puraniramai Pann* of the Tamil music. Generally in the morning rituals *Bilahari*, *Dhanyasi*, *Malayamarutham* and at midday, the most soothing *Ragas Madyamavathi* (*Sendurutti Pann*), *Surutti*, in the evening, *Purvi Kalyani* and *Kedara Guala* are played. When the deity is taken out in procession, in the temple inner corridors or its main streets, '*Mallari*' is played while lifting the deity or placing the deity. *Mallari* is not common in Kerala temples. It is only *Panchavadyam* that accompanies the procession. The brief version of *Mallari* is practiced in local temples of Palakkad District in Kerala.

Mallari and Rakthi Music in Temples

There are fields of *Nagaswaram* music for exclusive use in temples. There are two repertoires, one for daily rituals and the other for festivals. This music is never meant for the voice or instruments other than the *Nagaswaram*. The two exclusive areas of *Nagaswaram* music in temple traditions included certain compositions that were unique such as *Mallari* and *Rakthi*. These two sophisticated exercises integrate rhythm, ritual and entertainment. It mainly includes *Mallari*, *Raga Alapana*, *Rakthi* and *Pallavi*. Playing *Kirtanas* during the deity's procession was prohibited in ancient times. *Malla* means 'wrestler' or 'the palanquin-bearer' and '*ri*' means the 'loud sound'. Perhaps because of the choral loud sound produced by those, who carry the deity either on the shoulders or on a palanquin, the usage came to be 'Malla+ri, which later colloquially became *Mallari*, when a special musical item was first composed for the purpose. '*Mal*' again means fight or conquer and subdue the enemies; the

item might have been named 'Mallari'. It is a type of *Prabhanda*.

Mallari is a musical composition with no lyric (*Sahitya*) at all. The *Vidwans* of the earlier generations, the tradition-setters, were strict that no *Mallari* should have any *Sahitya*. *Mallari* has to be played only in the *Raga*, *Ghambeera Nata*, on a pentatonic scale, again a nuncupative rule. The deity is considered to set out in procession with *Vira rasa* to ward off the evil forces, this *Raga*, which has the same *rasa* is verily suitable for *Mallari*. According to many *Agamas* anything with God should begin with five letters etc. Saint Tirumular in his *Tirumandiram*, says, "Aindezutte anaikkum Adiyam", "Aindile todanga aindum kittume". In the *Bhajana* tradition, the every first item, the *Todaya Mangalam* sung by Sambandar, "Todudaya Seviyam" is also in *Khanda Chappu*. So in *Khanda gati*, each phrase has five syllables. This is called *Alarippu*. Since both *Nagaswaram* music and *Bharatanatyam* were fostered within the temple precincts, the common terminology for some items might have come into vogue. Number of *Swaras* in *Ghambira Natta Raga* is five and *Khanda* also has five counts. The *Tavil* accompanist has his pride of place for he has the right to draw first beat by playing the *Alarippu* on the *Tavil* always in *Khanda Nadai*. *Mallari* can be composed in any of the conventional thirty-five *Talas* or even in unusual measures.

During festivals, from the time the procession of deities leaves and returns, special patterns are made for playing *Mallari* and is associated with only the deity's procession. On some other occasions also, even in daily rituals, the *Mallari* has a part. At the time when the food (*Naivedya*) is brought to the shrine from the temple chariot (the car festival), a *Mallari* called, *Ter Mallari* in *Khanda gati* is to be played. Such traditions may vary from temple to temple but the part played by *Mallari* is the same. Usually the *Mallari* music is played to mark the different stages of worship in temples. At the beginning of the procession called 'Purappadu', these tunes are played regularly by the *Nagaswaram* players. The *Tripura Tala Mallari* is played when the deity comes to *Gopura vassal*, while the *Mallari* in different *Talas* are played after the procession starts. The *Ter Mallari* in *Khanda nadai* is played when the chariot starts moving with deity. The *Talikai Mallari* is played when the *Neivedyam* is taken to the deity. When water from a river or tank is brought to the temple, for bathing the idols, the water pot would follow the *Nagaswaram* troupe playing only a *Mallari*. Similarly, when the pots containing holy waters are taken out from the *Yagasala*, for the consecration of any temple, they will be preceded by *Mallari* music. This is called *Theertha Mallari*. *Theertha Mallari* in *Misra nadai* is played during 'Teertha vari'. The *Kumbha mallari* is played to welcome religious leaders and important people at the temple entrance. At the cross roads of the west main street, it is sometimes common to repeat the *Tripura tala Mallari* in double quick time before switching over to 'Hetcharikka' in *Yadukula Kambhoji* signaling the return to the base (*Yatha sthanam*). The car festival has its distinct signature tune called the *Ter Mallari* (Temple car *Mallari* in *Varali Raga*). In many temples, during the *Brahmotsava*, the last ritual every night is removing the ornaments and taking it to the

bed chamber. If the festival continues the next day also, a short *Mallari* is played at the end of all rituals. It is said that playing the *Mallari* then is to proclaim that the deity will go around in procession².

In Saivite temples, the deity is taken out from the *Alankara mandapa* and circumambulates (if there is a *Prakara* in that particular temple) with a small *Mallari* (called *Chinna Mallari*). When it comes in the arcade (called '*Nadai' vana pandal*') another *Mallari* (or many *Mallar*is depending upon the number of *Prakaras*) has to be played. When the deity reaches the place, where the temple chariot is stationed, another *Mallari* in *Triputa Tala* has to be necessarily played. If the *Nagaswara* artiste is very eminent, it will take at least one hour to complete this *Triputa tala Mallari*. Only on the day, the deity on *Bhiksatana*, starts its procession, (generally on the eighth day of *BrahmOtsava*), there will be no *Mallari* at all, right from the beginning. There is no difference in the kind of *Mallari* for Saivite or Vaishnavite temples. But the type may change depending upon the situation. Generally when *Mallari* is sounded, anyone at a distance can easily understand that the deity of some temple has set out in procession. For that manner, it may even be called a signature tune.

The *Rakthi* is yet another feature of *Nagaswaram* limited to the temple. No vocalist or other instrumentalist has so far dared to encroach on this sacred ground. The *Rakthi* is not exactly associated with any rituals as the *Mallari* is, but like the *Mallari*, it is in *Nata Raga*. The *Rakthi Melam* is a rare *Raga*, a highly competitive exercise integrating intellectual, emotional and spiritual experience. *Rakthi* is a kind of *Tatakaram*, i.e. it has no *Sahityam*. It is a treat to the listener to listen to the invariable prelude of *Kiravani* or *Kambhoji* or *Natta Kurunchi*. On entering the arena, the *Nagaswara Vidwan* will announce as a conventional courtesy that the repertoire for the night would be a severe test for the *Tavil* accompanist. The *Nagaswara* artiste comes prepared with the *Rakthi* whose beginnings (*Eduppu*) and finale (*arudi*) are the accompanist's blind spots. The *Rakthi* has no lyrics but there is a fixed formula "*Dheem takka tadhi thom*" in *Misra Ghati*, then varied to *Tisra gati* and played in third *Kalam*, *Chaturasra gati*. The *Rakthi* used to be highlighted, particularly on the day of the *Rishaba Vahanam* (the bull). The sol-fa syllables of rhythm are spun round, thus confounding even veterans, soaked and nurtured in rhythm. Traditions connect the *Rakthi* with Nataraja's dance³.

Unique *Nagaswara* traditions of some prominent temples

The tradition of playing *Nagaswara* particularly during festivals in Nataraja Temple Chidambaram follows some unique features. On the first day of any festival only *Arabhi* or *Dhanyasi Raga* has to be played. In the night, *Shankarabharanam Raga* is played. On the second day, *Ritiguala Raga* is played, on the third *Mayamalavagowla*, on the fourth *Chakravakam* are played. On the fifth day till the deity reaches the *Vahana* called as '*Teruvadaithan*' *Nagaswaram* followed by *Nattu* and *Muttu*. On the sixth day

Shanmughapriya or *Todi* should be followed. On the seventh day *Kambhoji* or *Varali*, on the eighth day the *Odakuru* song in *Nadanamakriya Raga* will have to be played. On the ninth day the temple car is brought out to take the deity out, the *Ther Mallari* should be played. When the deity reaches the *Ayiramkal Mantapa*, *Hechharika* songs set in *Ahiri* and *Nllambari* are played. These songs have to be followed by any one *Padam* on the presiding deity especially of Muthu Tandavar's composition on *Nagaswara*. On the eleventh day *Huseni Raga* has to be played. These are the music traditions that were formatted for the Chidambaram Temple and are followed to this day⁴.

Bari Nayanam is the *Nagaswaram* used in Tiruvarur Tyagaraja Temple and is about two and a half feet long and has a lower pitch. It is used daily in the evening *Puja*. The *Tiruvarur* temple repertoire had a few more items for ritual worship such as *Nadupatti*, *Vattam*, *Padavarnam* of *Ramaswami Pillai*, *Papanasam Mudaliar's Padam*, *Kattalai Padams*, *Keerthanams*, *Tevarams*, *Kocchakams* and others. The *Mallari* was a must when the deity (*Utsavar*) is taken out in procession. During the float festival, a *Nagaswara* concert is conducted in the *Teppom*.

Another tradition concerns the performance on the *Timri Nagaswaram* of specific *Varnas* and *Keerthanams* that accompany the regular *Pujas* and *Sri Bali* procession during the annual festivals at the *Sri Padmanabhaswami* Temple in Kerala. The *Timiri* is capable of producing certain *Swaras* of high pitch having a long range and was selected by Swathi Tirunal for special '*Nagaswara Seva*'. This *Seva* was transported to the secular stage of the birthday festival and featured during the inaugural function. There was a three-hour *Nagaswara* recital later by *Nataraja Kambhar* and *Muruga Kambhar*, *vidwans* attached to the temple, who used *Timiri* to play *Varnas* and *Keerthanams* of the Maharaja in the unique style usually heard only inside the temple⁵. The daily practice includes *Palliyunarthal* – '*Jaya jaya ramaramana* in *Devagandhari*, and *Sadhu Vibhatam*, in *Bhupalam*, in *Sree bali ezunallathu 'Pankajalochana'* in *Kalyani*, *Badradipam* and *Prabhata Sreebali - Danyasi*, *PunnagavaraAli*, *saveri* to be played on *Nagaswara*.

Mahadeva Temple at Vaikkom in Kerala also follows a specific tradition of *Nagaswara* in its festival. The *Ashtami* festival end with a procession witnesses a unique feature in *Nagaswara* music. There is a belief that Lord *Mahadeva* would not like to miss his son *Subramania*, at Udayanapuram Temple. When the procession concludes at Udayanapuram Temple, a unique musical rendering of '*Dukha Ghantaram*', a *Raga* mentioned in *Katakali* music is performed. Its *Rasa* is pathos. The two hour rendering of this *Raga* is in *Nagaswara*. The temple has preserved a stone *Nagaswara* in its *Bhantarapura* (a store room) and though not in use, but is kept in good condition.

Conclusion

In India, religion is a way of life. It is an integral part of the Indian tradition. For majority of Indian religion permeates every aspect of life, from common-place daily chores to education and even politics. *Tamilakam* (Kerala and Tamil Nadu) is considered as the cradle and treasure land of temples. Apart from a place of worship, the temples of this land have played a vital role in enhancing the cultural activities and influenced the daily lives of the people. It is clear that the roots of South Indian Music are in the temples. The slabs engraved with compositions and musical sculptures, musical instrument like *Nagaswara* and musician within the temple enclosures show the heredity of the music. The temples here stand as the pillars of South Indian Classical Music and give inspiration for generations to come, especially to those who choose music as a career. This offers a promising and fertile area for further research as well.

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- ⁴ Geetha Rajagopal - Ibid.
- ⁵ S.Natarajan, “Swati Tirunal Festival In Trivandrum - Interesting new features” *Sruti* Issue 18 August 1, 1985, p.p. 6 – 7.

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