

Traversing Temples in Tamil Nadu by Julie Carpenter, Mrinalini Rao and Swamini Sumatmananda

(Continued from the last issue)

Chidambaram

The final day of the tour started with the famous Chidambaram Temple, considered by many to be the centre of the universe. At the entrance gopuram, Dr. Nagaswamy pointed to the 108 dance karana sculptures. It is a marvel indeed that Bharatnatyam and other traditional dances practiced to this day based on Natya Shastra have their counterparts etched in stone for posterity.

Here, Shiva as Nataraja is the main deity. Perhaps the greatest blessing here was to witness first-hand the Lord depicted as Akasha, a darshan often referred to by Pujya Swamiji. A mala of 51 golden bilva leaves is suspended in space as though garlanding the Lord. The priests graciously welcomed us and facilitated everything for us from darshan, to arati and prasadam. As per Agama shastra, dance (Natya) was definitely one of the elements of a sixteen-step puja in a temple. This practice having been lost over the years was revived by Dr. Nagaswamy. He not only reinstated dance in the temple but also initiated the annual Natyanjali dance festival during Mahashivaratri when dancers offer their art at the feet of Nataraja.

We were fortunate to have demonstrations of Tevaram, Nadaswaram and Natyam hosted by Mr K. Swaminathan and family. Music, also being an offering to the deity, as per Agama shastra had certain stipulations – only specific ragas could be performed in the morning, noon and evening. We learnt that Natya shastra, written by Bharata around 200 CE., has come to shape classical music, dance and literature. In fact, it could well be regarded as the foundation for fine arts of Indian culture.

The last stop was Gangaikondacholesvara temple, dedicated to Shiva. It was built by the son of the Chola King who built the great Tanjore temple. Sculptures of Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Surya and many more, all of which are still intact, adorn the exterior walls. According to a legend, sacred waters from Ganga were brought by a devotee for the Chola king who then offered it for abhishekham on the lingam. Hence the name, Gangaikondacholesvara.

The Eastern walls of the mukhamandapa on either side are decorated with Shiva in different aspects of anugraha. A feature not frequently seen is a sculpture depicting King Rajendra Chola who built the temple, being blessed by Shiva.

On our way back to Anaikatti we stopped at Mayavaram where the temple elephant came and blessed each one of us with its trunk. After enjoying a delicious feast organised by Kitchen Manager Sri Ganesh we headed back to Anaikatti - blessed by darshan, better informed, deeply inspired by the glory of our rich culture and heritage and committed to learn more and share the same.

There is much to be grateful for. All the aspects of our trip from transportation, to accommodation, to the food were well organised. For all those who contributed, including those who have not been individually mentioned, we offer our heart-felt thanks. When we thanked Dr. Nagaswamy, who at 83 years old continues to actively share his passion and commitment to ensuring the continuity of our Vedic heritage, he simply responded, "It is I who am fortunate to have had as my audience, students with knowledge of samskritam - really it is all Pujya Swamiji's Grace! "