

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

It all started when at the end of a series of lectures on temples given by Dr. Nagaswamy, Pujya Swamiji stated, "It is one thing to see a temple, but to see that temple through Dr. Nagaswamy's eyes is quite another."

Dr. Nagaswamy is the former director of Archeology, Government of Tamil Nadu. His expertise touches every aspect of ancient temple arts, culture, history and architecture. When one sees a temple through Dr. Nagaswamy's eyes one appreciates the enormous hard work and workmanship of the thousands of artisans and labourers as well as the shraddha and bhakti of the kings reflected in the sculptures and structures. The sculptures come to life as Dr. Nagaswamy points out the craftsmanship, be it in the detailing of the eyes, the curve of a smile, or the appearance of movement in the stone form. Over hundreds of generations, temples have served as an irreplaceable sanctuary for people from all walks of life, an altar of worship, a place of fulfillment of wishes and desires as well as a reflection of the art, culture and times of that generation. Therefore, the opportunity to take a tour of Mahabalipuram, Kanchipuram and Chidambaram with Dr. Nagaswamy as our guide was a tremendous blessing. Swami Sakshatkritanandaji, Swami Shankaranandaji and about 50 to 60 three-year course students from Anaikatti set off on September 2nd. The first stop was in Salem for lunch hosted by Mr. Ravikumar at the LRN Residency, where all enjoyed a sumptuous lunch. Arriving at the Uthandi ashram we were greeted

by Swami Ishwaranandaji and enjoyed the warm hospitality of the ashram staff.

Mahabalipuram: Our first visit was to Mahabalipuram, also known as Mamallapuram. Dr. Nagaswamy transported us to back to the reign of the glorious Pallava dynasty spanning 600 years from 2 CE (Current Era) to 9 CE. The kings of this period, like the great Narasimha Varman and his successor, Rajasimha Atyantakama (a king of unlimited fancies), were lovers of Sanskrit and creative art. Dr. Nagaswamy explained that the temples here portray events described in the Mahabharata, as well as showcase the transition from rock-cut architecture to structural building.

Each sculpture in Mahabalipuram is unique. From the beautiful sculptures at Tiger cave and Arjuna's Tapas to the Five Rathas, Dr. Nagaswamy shared the symbology behind the sculptures, and vividly brought their stories to life. Arjuna's penance is a 90-foot long rock face with a fissure in the centre representing Ganga coming down. Arjuna is portrayed doing penance as Shiva presents him with the Pashupata astra while various beings and creatures, meticulously sculpted, look on.

At Mahishasura Mardini cave there is a powerful depiction of the fight between goddess Durga, and the buffalo-headed Mahishasura, symbolizing the triumph of knowledge over avidya. The mandapa is carved into the granite rock face of a hill and is considered as one of the best of the Pallava period.

Adivaraha cave is also rock-cut, dating from



the late 7th century. Bringing our attention to the subtleties of various sculptures, Dr. Nagaswamy particularly pointed to the sculpture of Lord Vishnu in the incarnated form of Varaha, the boar, lifting Bhudevi, the mother earth goddess, from the sea. In this scene the sculptor managed to portray the gentleness with which Varaha must have held Bhudevi.

In the same Varaha cave, the Trivikrama panel depicts Vishnu as the Lord of the three worlds. There is also a panel of Krishna lifting the Govardhana Hill, as well as Shiva as Gangadhara. The bhakti and skill of the artisans of the Five Rathas is particularly apparent. Each ratha, is carved from a single stone. While having nothing to do with the Pandavas, they are named after them. The largest, named Dharmaraja Ratha, is a three storied temple with an octagonal shikara. At the close by Shore temple, one finds Shiva and a reclining Vishnu. The wall of this temple, overlooking the Bay of Bengal, is topped with Nandi sculptures.

Kanchipuram: In Kanchipuram we first visited Kailasanatha temple, the most ancient surviving temple that has not had any alterations since 700 CE. Both its outer and inner prakaras contain sculptures that are of superb quality. Unique to this temple is the pradakshina route around the main sanctum, the entrance and exit for which are no more than tunnels, which some of us bravely crawled through. Legend has that this pradakshina symbolises circumambulation around Mt. Kailas.

It is said about this temple that Lord Shiva delayed the planned consecration date by a day. Shiva appeared to the builder of the temple, King Rajasimha, in a dream informing him that the consecration of this temple could not take place on the day that had been set as he had promised to attend the consecration of another temple that very day. Upon awakening the King made inquiries about the other temple. He discovered that the other temple consecration was for a temple built by a poor brahmana, piece by piece, over many years - completely in the brahmana's heart. The king was so inspired by the brahmana's bhakti that he proceeded to construct a physical version of the brahmana's temple.

At the Shiva temple of Ekambaranatha, Dr. Nagaswamy explained that when one worships the Shivalinga one invokes Shiva as the whole. That is Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu - the creator, sustainer, and resolver. The base of the lingam

which is not visible, represents Brahma. The middle octagonal portion represents Vishnu and the top portion represents Shiva. Sharing this profound treasure of symbolism as per Agama shastra, he quipped that the so called division between Shaivites and Vaishnavites was due to not understanding this. It is said that at this temple Parvati performed penance and worshipped a Shivalingam made of sand in the hopes of gaining Lord Shiva as her husband. Wanting to test her devotion Shiva caused river waters to overflow and thereby threaten to engulf the Shivalingam. Using her body to shield it, Parvati embraced the Lingam, thereby saving it from destruction. Shiva touched by the gesture materialized in person and married her.

In Kanchipuram we experienced the kind hospitality of Br. Kumar Chaitanya and his family members who hosted all of us in their home for a delicious lunch that was generously sponsored by Smt. Karuna. Fortified by the meal we headed to Vaikunta Perumal temple. Here Vishnu is worshipped as Vaikunthanathan and his consort Lakshmi as Vaikundavalli. There are three separate sanctums on different levels, each one shows Vishnu in different forms, sitting, reclining and standing. There are many beautiful sculptures on the walls in the prakaram, and each pillar has a sculpted lion.

Although Kamakshi Amman Temple was not on our itinerary, Devi beckoned to us - something that was not to be resisted. We took darshan of Kamakshi, seated in a majestic Padmasana, a form signifying peace and prosperity, instead of the traditional standing pose. A notable feature of this present Kamakshi temple, is a Sri Chakra.

The last temple we visited in Kanchipuram was the Varadharaja Perumal Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu. It is one of the Divya Deceams, the 108 temples of Vishnu believed to have been visited by the 12 poet saints, or Alwars. We glimpsed the smiling Lord, 40 feet in height and His assuring abhaya mudra. The temple shows the architectural skills of ancient vishvakarma sthapatihis in temple architecture. There is a 100-pillared hall which has sculptures depicting Ramayana and Mahabharatha. There are many murals of the late Vijayanagara empire painted on the ceilings, as well as many beautiful structures. Another significant feature of the temple are the beautifully carved lizards, gilded with gold that are over the sanctum.

(To be continued..)