

Religious Practices And Cultural Significance Of Thirukachur Kachabeswarar Temple: A Study

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Abstract

The Thirukachur Kachabeswarar temple, located in Thirukachur village near Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, is dedicated to Lord Shiva in the form of Kachabeswarar. Daily rituals such as Nitya Puja and Archanas, along with Abhishekam, Alankaram, Aarti, Homam, and special pujas, form the core of worship practices, emphasizing devotion and offerings. The temple also hosts a series of festivals including Maha Shivaratri, Panguni Uthiram, Aadi Pooram, Navaratri, and Pradosham, each marked by elaborate ceremonies to honor deities and commemorate auspicious occasions. These celebrations, along with numerous other events following the Hindu calendar, attract devotees from distant places, contributing to the temple's vibrant religious and cultural ambiance.

Keywords: Lord Shiva, Hindu rituals, Maha Shivaratri, Panguni Uthiram, Aadi Pooram, Navaratri, Pradosham.

Introduction

The Thirukachur Kachabeswarar temple, situated in Thirukachur village near Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, India, venerates Lord Shiva in the form of Kachabeswarar. Daily rituals such as Nitya Puja and Archanas are conducted alongside Abhishekam, Alankaram, Aarti, Homam, and various special pujas, emphasizing devotion and offerings. Festivals like Maha Shivaratri, Panguni Uthiram, Aadi Pooram, Navaratri, and Pradosham are observed with elaborate ceremonies, honoring deities and celebrating auspicious

occasions. Throughout the year, a plethora of festivals and rituals follow the Hindu calendar, drawing devotees from far and wide, enriching the temple's ambiance with vibrant religious and cultural fervor.

Shiva temples hold immense significance in Hinduism, with their worship and festivals playing a crucial role for devotees. Lord Shiva, a principal deity, embodies destruction, transformation, and the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. Worshipping Shiva establishes a spiritual connection, seeking blessings for a fulfilling life amidst obstacles. Puja, associated with Shiva temples, seeks blessings for health, wealth, and inner peace, performed for mental and emotional balance. Shravan, a sacred month, witnesses devotees fasting, visiting temples, and offering prayers. Festivals like Shivaratri celebrate Shiva's divine marriage, fostering unity among communities. Shiva temples, rich in cultural and architectural significance, serve as pilgrimage sites, symbolizing cosmic rhythms and divine presence. Temple rituals, guided by Tantras, embody devotion and serve as conduits for religious expression. Puja, whether personal or communal, carries deep spiritual significance, reflecting devotion and seeking divine grace. Temple ceremonies, including daily rituals and festivals, form integral parts of worship, creating sacred spaces for contemplation and prayer.

NITHYAPUJAS

Nithyapujas, the daily worship rituals performed in temples, encompass two forms: Atmarthapuja (personal worship) and Pararthapuja (temple worship). According to the Agamas, daily pujas are categorized into three levels: Uttamam (superior), Madhyam (average), and Adhamam (inferior). These distinctions are reiterated in the Kamikam literature, where Pararthapuja is graded based on quality. Additionally, Atmarthapuja, introduced by Kamikam, involves rituals aimed at fulfilling personal desires. Santhi pujas, performed twelve times a day but ranked in three categories, hold significance in temples like Arulmigu Thirukatcheeswarar, where four Santhipujas are conducted: Kalasandhi (Morning Puja), Uchchikalam (Midday), Sayaratchari (Evening Puja), and Arthajamam (Night Puja).

NIMITTIKA PUJA

Nimittikapuja, conducted on special occasions or festival days, aims for specific desires or expiation. Unlike daily pujas, Nimittikapuja doesn't focus on the Linga but on ritual sets such as snapana Karma and santi karma. Mahotsavas, the principal annual festivals, and occasional ceremonies attract devotees from nearby areas. Rulers often participated in these pujas, instituting special Sandhipujas in their names. Nimittikapujas are conducted without disrupting Nityapuja, sometimes occurring together on auspicious days like Amavasai, pradosam, kritika, Somavara, and Sukravara. Monthly rituals like Panchapanva and royal orders for specific Nimittikapujas demonstrate their enduring significance.

RITUALS AND SIGNIFICANCE

These rituals, based on important principles, impart spiritual knowledge and wisdom. Minor rituals like Bhudha Sandhi and Antharyajanas prepare aspirants for the path of wisdom. Nityapuja encompasses various pujas for deities like Suryapuja, Ganesapuja, and Siva puja, with abhisheka preceding Neivedya offerings. Naimittika puja, held on auspicious days, doesn't interfere with Nityapuja but may coincide when necessary. Panchaparva rituals, occurring monthly, include Amavasai or Pournami, Pradosha, Kritika, Somavara, and Sukravara. Before Nityapuja commences, purification rituals like Tirupalli Ezuchi are performed, symbolizing the awakening of the deity from sleep. Abhisheka, followed by decoration and Archana with sacred leaves, marks the culmination of these daily worship ceremonies.

Kala Sandhi or Ushakalam

Following the Thiruppalliezhuchi, the morning oblation known as Kala Sandhi, or Usha Puja, takes place. Starting at 6:00 am, shortly after sunrise, it concludes by 9:00 am. The rituals of Kala Sandhi closely resemble those of earlier morning pujas, involving offerings in the sanctum of the deities, with cooked rice and payasam presented as neivedya.

Uchchikalam

Between 10:00 am and 12:00 noon, the Uchchikalam puja, or midday ceremony, is conducted. During this time, the priest offers neivedya to the deities, with curd rice being the principal meal. This puja mirrors the morning rituals albeit in an abbreviated form, accompanied by the presence of pipers, drummers, buglers, and

flutists. Dhupa (burning of incense) and deeparadhana (waving of light) accompany the oblations. Monday's Uchcha puja holds particular sanctity, with special reverence paid to Lord Nataraja. The puja begins with rituals for Ganapathi and proceeds to honor Lord Nataraja, Muruga, Dhakshinamurthy, Durgai, and Nandi. The oduvar sings Devaram hymns, marking the conclusion of the forenoon puja, after which the temple remains closed until 4:30 pm.

Sayaratchai

Reopening at 4:30 pm for the evening worship, the Sayaratchai puja occurs before sunset, typically between 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm. It is a condensed repetition of the morning puja, considered a grand ceremony where devotees believe all deities gather to worship. The oduvar stands before the temple, singing Devaram hymns during this procession.

Erandamkalam

Erandamkalam, or the second midday puja, and Arthajamapuja usually commence at 9:00 pm, concluding by 10:30 pm. Offerings such as milk, payasam, tamarind rice (pulisadam), and curd rice are presented as neivedya to each deity. The oduvar continues to sing Devaram hymns before the temple during this puja. Arthajamapuja, though termed the midnight puja, is held earlier, between 9:30 pm and 10:30 pm. Abhisheka is performed for God Arulmigu Thirukatcheeswarar alone, with pepper rice offered as neivedya. Finally, deeparadhana is conducted for the deities of the temple, followed by neivedya, and the adorned idol is placed on a swing in the Amman shrine's Palliyarai.

Revealing Pujas and Festivals Through Inscriptions

The Hindu festivals, or Uthsavas, were intricately crafted by revered saints of yore. Their designs were not merely celebratory but rooted in profound wisdom, harnessing the forces of nature within the universe. These sages possessed a deep understanding of human nature and desires, as well as a keen awareness of humanity's vulnerability to supernatural forces and intellect. Numerous inscriptions bear testament to the endowments made for the conduct of specific pujas, ceremonial rites of worship, within temples. These inscriptions meticulously outline the provisions required for the performance of these rituals, including

stipulations regarding timing and method. A comprehensive examination of the pujas observed in contemporary times, alongside the documentation of these ceremonies in inscriptions, illuminates various facets of the worship system prevalent in bygone eras. Among the earliest available inscriptions is one dating back to Aditya I (884 A.D.), which records the endowment of sheep to generate income for lighting lamps. Another inscription, attributed to Rajendra II (913 A.D.), highlights a royal decree mandating 56 festivals in a specific temple. Moreover, the corpus of inscriptions reveals frequent endowments dedicated to pujas and festivals within temple precincts. One notable inscription from the 19th regnal year of Vira Narayana Sambuvuraya grants a village tax-free to the Arulmigu Thirukatcheeswarar temple. This endowment is earmarked for conducting the service known as Viranarayana Sandhi, as well as for associated offerings and worship. Similarly, other inscriptions detail land grants and donations made by monarchs and benefactors for sustaining temple rituals, such as lamp lighting and floral offerings. Furthermore, inscriptions shed light on the philanthropic endeavors of local communities and trading guilds. These groups contributed to temple maintenance and prosperity by allocating a portion of their trade-derived income. Mentioned within these inscriptions are various trade guilds, including Nanadesis, Nagaram, Tisaiyayirattu Ainuruvar, and Valanjiar, alongside descriptions of their respective functions and contributions to temple activities. Offerings such as sandalwood, incense, camphor, and flowers are cited among their donations.

Weekly Festivals

An inscription dating to the 26th regnal year of Rajaraja I (A.D. 1011-1012) documents the conduct of a weekly festival on Sundays, with gold being donated for this purpose. Presently, the weekly festival is observed on Fridays, during which the bronze idol of Thani Amman (Goddess Muthambigai) is adorned and paraded in circumambulation within the precincts of the Amman temple, adding a vibrant rhythm to the temple's spiritual tapestry.

Chithirai Festivals

The advent of the month of Chithirai, marked by Varudappirappu, signifies the onset of the Tamil New Year, also known as Chithirai Vishu. This auspicious occasion typically coincides with the 13th or

14th day of April in the Gregorian calendar, symbolizing the sun's entry into the sign of Aries within the Zodiac. According to legend, Brahma chose Vishu as the day to initiate the creation of the Universe. Additionally, it is believed that Rama's triumphant return to Ayodhya after vanquishing the Rakshasas occurred on Chithiravishu. Amidst great pomp and ceremony, people partake in auspicious rituals early in the morning, aspiring for good fortune throughout the year. The days within the month of Chithirai are often characterized by sweltering heat, prompting gatherings of people seeking respite in open spaces. Special abhishekas are conducted in temples on the eve of the New Year, followed by the reading and expounding of the new panchangam by temple priests in the evening.

Chithira Pournami Festival

The Chithira Pournami festival, observed to appease Chithira Gupta, the chief accountant of Yama, is a grand affair, particularly in Chengalpattu since the 10th century A.D. This enduring tradition is substantiated by historical inscriptions, underscoring its significance over the centuries.

Vaikasi Festivals

Vaikasi witnesses the grand celebration of Vaikasi Vasantharchavam and Visakam festivals, notably in Thirukatchoor. Vaikasivisakam, occurring when the asterism Visaka reigns in the month of Vaikasi (corresponding to May-June), holds special importance as it commemorates the incarnation of God Subramanya. Devotees participate fervently, bearing countless Kavadis and Palgudam, while acts of charity, such as offering cooked rice mixed with curd, symbolize community generosity. Brahmotsavam festival spanning eighteen days is another highlight, attested through inscriptions, adding to the spiritual fervor of the season.

Ani Tirumanjanam (June-July) Festival

Ani Tirumanjanam, celebrated fervently across religious centers like Thirukatchoor, Kanchipuram, Chidambaram, and Madurai, marks a moment of gratitude for divine protection from the summer's heat. Festivities include elaborate rituals, adorned with precious jewels and garments, culminating in deity processions through village streets.

Adipuram (July-August) Festival

Adipuram, revered across Hindu temples in Southern India, particularly venerates Goddess Sakthi. The festival, occurring on the special star Puram in the month of Adi, commemorates the goddess's purported descent to bless humanity. This celebration, observed with great pomp in various temples, signifies the people's belief in the divine forces and their interconnectedness with the natural world.

Vinayaka Chaturthi (Avani - August-September) Festival

Vinayaka Chaturthi, celebrated nationwide with fervor, marks a momentous occasion for seeking knowledge and success in endeavors. In the Arulmigu Thirukatcheeswarar temple, worship of Vinayaka in various forms accentuates the deity's greatness, with special abhishekas and offerings. The festival concludes with a procession around the temple precincts, highlighting the widespread devotion to Lord Vinayaka.

Pradosha

Pradosha puja stands out as a distinctive evening worship ritual in Shiva temples, occurring twice a month on the thirteenth day after the new moon (Amavasai) and full moon (Pournami). This festival holds a unique significance within the realm of Shiva worship. Legend has it that during the churning of the ocean of milk by the Devas to obtain the nectar, a lethal poison emerged, endangering the heavenly beings. In a benevolent act, Lord Shiva intervened on a Trayodasi day, coinciding with a Saturday, and stood amidst the Devas, Rishis, and celestial beings, between the horns of Vrishabha, performing the cosmic Sandhyatandava to alleviate their distress.

The Pradosha observed on a Saturday is esteemed above others. Notably, the Thirukatchoor temple is renowned as the Nitya Pradosha temple. During Pradosha days, the Nandi Abhishekam precedes the ablution ceremonies for the primary deities. The ritual offerings include oil, milk, panchamirtham, tender coconut water, sandal paste, rosewater, and holy ashes, with plain rice presented as Neivedya. Subsequently, Rishabhavahanamurthi circumambulates the inner precincts, and sacrificial tributes are made in all directions. Pradosha Nayanar, adorned and seated on Vrishaba Vahana, traverses the inner

prakara before being taken to the Kalyanamandaba, where Lord Shiva and his consort are ceremoniously dismounted from the Vrishabha Vahana and reinstated in their respective sanctuaries.

Kirithika

On all Kirithika days, following the completion of Irandam Kalam, Subramanya with Valli and Devasena undergoes abhishekaalangara and deeparadhana. The bronze idols of Subramaniya and his consorts are lavishly adorned and paraded on the Mayura Vahana around the Prakara before being installed in the Alangara Mandapa for reverence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the religious practices and cultural significance of Thirukachur Kachabeswarar Temple illuminates the profound interplay between spirituality, tradition, and community. Through an exploration of rituals, festivals, and architectural elements, we have gained insights into the deep-rooted connections between religious beliefs and cultural expressions within the temple's context. The enduring devotion and reverence exhibited by devotees underscore the enduring significance of this sacred site as a locus for spiritual fulfillment and communal identity. As we continue to delve into the intricate tapestry of religious heritage, the Thirukachur Kachabeswarar Temple stands as a testament to the richness of cultural diversity and the timeless allure of religious practice in shaping societies across generations. Thus, this study not only enhances our understanding of the temple's religious significance but also underscores its broader cultural relevance in the tapestry of human civilization.

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