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Manifestation of Vina in the Images and Idols of South Indian Temples: A Historical Approach

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Abstract

The history of the development of Classical Music in the southern part of our country is closely associated with development of temple culture. The temples have been largely responsible for the growth and development of all important forms of arts. The art of music, dance, painting, sculpture and architecture developed in India chiefly because of their use in the temples and their patronage. Music is also a necessary ingredient in many of the services in the temples. In addition, the art and art effects 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 forms of art, 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 Vina in the Images and Idols of South Indian Temples" explores a study of musical instrument Vina illustrated on the behalf of Temple Sculptures. This article is borne out from my Ph.D. thesis titled 'Role of Temples of Southern India in Preserving and Propagating Classical Music through Its Architecture, Iconography and Art Forms' submitted to Kannur University on 2014. All the photographs cited here is taken by

myself through temple visit. The study is confined to the temples from states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Key words: Kshethra, Mantapa, Gopuras, Garbha Griha, Swasthikasana, Namaskara Mantapa, Nataraja, Kiratharjuneeya.

Introduction:

The concept of *"Kshethra"*[1] 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. 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*[2], basement of the pillared hall and so on. Murals are mainly seen on the walls of *GarbhaGriha*[3], ceilings of pillared halls. Individual sculptures form part of bronze figures, wooden bracket figures, and monolithic sculptures. In some temples, processional deity is decorated with some musical instrument like V*ina* and flute. Sources of Musical sculptures are classified in to three categories.

[1] Kshethra : Kshethra denotes a holy precinct
[2] Gopura : Gate house; storied structure used as a gateway to the Temple
[3] Garbha Griha : Inner apartment, inner sanctuary of Temple

Sculptures on music as part of temple architecture:

It includes various episodes from *Puranas* and also about the ruling dynasties. Sculptures of rulers with their signatures are found on the pillars. When the temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, *Dasavataras*[4] are carved on its pillars. In the case of Siva temple, various episodes from *Siva Purana* like, *Nataraja* forms, *Tripurantaka* forms, *Vinadhara Dakshinamurthi*, *Kiratarjuneeyam* etc. are mostly carved on the pillars. The next part of architecture is the basement of pillared hall. Usually, basement is depicted with sculptures on dance. Darasuram in Kumbakonam and Chidambaram have depicted very clear sculptures depicting dances in the basement.

Another important source of musical iconographies found in the temple precincts is the paintings. Murals are generally seen on the walls of *GarbaGriha*. Many temples in Kerala have murals in the *GarbhaGriha, NamaskaraMantapa*,[5] *DwajaMantapa* and ceilings of *Mantapa.* Generally three types of carvings depicting music are found in these murals namely, Nataraja[6] Form of Lord Siva, *Venu Gopala* and many saints like *Narada* holding a *Tamburu* in the scenes from *Purana* are some of the usual themes of murals in the temples. We can see in Thanjavur, both the Chola as well as Nayaka phase of murals on the walls. Mannargudi Raja Gopala temple has beautiful depiction of musicians carved on the outer parts of the *GarbhaGriha* as murals.

Gopuras in the temples are also places for the musical and dance images. Mostly huge towers are found in almost all prominent temples. The concrete sculptures of various *Parivara Devatas* and images of gods and goddesses are depicted on the outside parts of the tower. And in its inner granite parts, usually dancers and musicians are depicted. One can see one hundred and eight *Karanas* of *Bharatanatya* on the tower in the Chidambaram temple. Wooden bracket figures of Kerala are another category of sculptures on music available in temple precincts. Usually it is attached to the walls of *GarbhaGriha* in between the ceilings. Most of the sculptures found in Siva and Vishnu temples depict episodes from *Kiratarjuneeya*[7]. But in some temples, there are

[4] Dasavatars : Ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu
[5] Namaskara Mantapa : An open or closed pillared assembly hall, in front of the shrine of a temple
[6] Nataraja : Dancing form of Lord Siva
[7] Kiratharjuneeya : One of the incarnation of Lord Siva in the form of a Kirata

also the depictions of *Venugopala* and *vina* players. In some rare cases, the sculptures of *chatura* pose of Lord *Nataraja* and female dancers are depicted on wooden bracket figures. These are seen in temples in Thiruvanjikulam and Triprayar in Trissur District, Kerala.

Sculptures on music as the main deity of the temple:

One of the prominent features of South Indian temples is to have sculptures on music and dance as the presiding deity in the temple. The most important two familiar deities are *Nataraja*, a form of Lord Siva and *Venugopala*. These two deities are kept one in the main and the other in sub shrine of the many temples. Goddess *Saraswati* is kept as the presiding deity or the one in sub shrines in some temples. Koothanur in Tanjavur District of Tamil Nadu has one shrine dedicated to Goddess Saraswati. The deity holds a *Vina* in her hands. This deity is worshipped by Tamil Poet *Kambar* and he wrote Ramayana into Tamil. In many temples, sub shrines are dedicated to Goddess *Saraswati*. In Kancheepuram Kamakshi Temple in Tamil Nadu, there is a sub shrine dedicated to *Syamala*, similar to *Saraswati* holding a *Vina*. Rameswaram Ramanathaswami Temple in Tamil Nadu has one of its sub shrines dedicated to Goddess *Saraswati*. In *Navarathri Mandapas* in Kerala temples, there are bronze figures of Goddess *Saraswati* for e.g in Kodungallur and Chottanikkara in Kerala. Apart from the above sculptures, the decorations on deities on procession are depicted with *Vina* or flute. It is mainly seen on *Kailasa Vahana* of the Siva Temple. There is a golden sculpture of *Ravana* who is always associated with a human headed *Vina* in his hands. These are seen in Madurai and Chidambaram temples. Such types of mount or decorations are very common in the temples of Tamil Nadu. It is only taken out during the time of annual festivals.

Images of Musical Composers or Saints in the Temple:

South Indian temples have one of the important aspects of temple musical compositions by various *Alwars* and *Nayanmars* saints. Bronze and stone images of these saints are also found in the temple precincts especially in the southern part of the circumambulatory path in the temple. Most of these images are that of composers of various (Ragas) *Panns*, some images holding musical instruments like *Yazh* or flute. So in the aspects of musical iconographies, these images

are considered to be part of musical icons. Especially, *Tevara* trinity and *Neelakanta yazhpanar*, had composed musical works and they were depicted in sculptures.

References to Vina in temple sculptures:

Stringed instruments in ancient times whether bowed, plucked or struck varieties, were commonly known as *Vina*. The modern *Vina* before it took the present shape had undergone different changes, giving birth to several types of stringed instruments. One of the main stringed instruments found in temples sculptures is *Vina*. Among the different types of *Vinas* found in temples, are *Saraswati Vina*, *Naga Vina* and *RudraVina*. Apart from *Vina*, various type of instruments like *Tampuras*, *Yazh* type stringed verities are also seen in some temples. *Yazh* is one of the ancient musical instruments and today it is obsolete. The *Pallava* (6^{th} Century) representation of the *Vina* in *Mahabalipuram* on the panel depicting *Arjuna's* penance, *Kinnaras* are seen playing the *Vinas* with oval shaped resonators to the accompaniment of cymbals played by their spouse-*Kinnaries*. The images of the *Vinadhara Dakashinamurthi* in temples, carved on the *Dharmaraja Ratha* may be assigned to the period of *NarasimhaVarman I*. This stringed verity is depicted on *Pallava* monument in Kanchipuram Kailasanatha temple, Vaikuntaperumal temple, Kamakshi temple, Amritakadeswara Temple Tirukadayur, and Darasuram Temple in Kumbakonam and so on.

Another very common *Vina* found in temples in Tamil Nadu is *Rudra Vina*. *Rudra Vina* is not much popular in South Indian Classical Music. The shape of the instrument and how you hold it are different in the case of *Rudra Vina*. As a concluding remark it must be added that in North India, the *Rudra Vina* in its modified form is considered as one of the popular concert instruments. Mostly this variety is seen on pillars of the *Mandapas*. It is also seen as an accompaniment to dance performance or even as an individual instrument. Usually sculptures of female and male saints in temples are depicted holding *Rudra Vina*. Females generally hold these instruments in *Swasthikasana*. This instrument is seen in the sculptures in the period of *Rajendra Chola* i.e. in *Darasuram* Temple - *Kumbakonam* (12^{th} century) and the sculptures of *Nayakas* in *Srirangam* Temple on its pillared halls (17^{th} century).

Another *Vina* found in temple sculptures is *Naga Vina.* It is similar to the usual *Vina* of South India but its head piece is carved to resemble the hood of a snake. This is very common in many temples in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala. Generally sculptures in Tamil Nadu are found on pillars in granite. Temples in Kerala, there are only wooden bracket figures showing players of such type of *Vina*, for e.g. in *Thiruvanjikulam* and *Tiruvangad* in Kerala. In the *Mayuranatha* temple and *Abhayamba* shrine in *Mayavaram* Tamil Nadu, there are a number of monolithic sculptures of *Naga Vina* players. It is one of the features of this temple that sculptures connected with music are only that of *Naga Vina* players. Generally in the temples in Tamil Nadu, especially in *Srirangam* and *Tirukadayur,* sculptures are those of female *Naga Vina* players in *Swastikasana*[8]. But in Kerala's wooden bracket figures, only male *Naga Vina* players are seen. One of the *Naga Vina* of such type is also exhibited in the Hill Palace Museum in *Thripunithura, Eranakulam* District of Kerala.

The Modern south Indian *Vina* are seen from sculptures in *Rameswaram* and Madurai, we infer that the *Vina* with eleven frets continued to exist even during the period of the *Nayakas* (late 16th and early 17th century). Modern *Thanjavur Vina* is depicted mostly in the sculptures of Goddess *Saraswati* and also music composers like Muthuswami Dikshitar. It is only found in the sculptures made during the period of *Nayakas*. *Raghunatha Nayak* had popularized modern twenty-four fretted *Vina* and such phases of sculptures also have the depiction of fretted *Vina.* The sculptures of fretted *Vina* were found in *Parimalaranga* Temple in Indalur, *Darmmasamvardhini* Temple Tiruvayyar and also in Rameswaram Ramandaswami Temple. In Kerala, Murals of *Chatura Tandava* form of Siva with his many attributes among them one is a Fretted Vina. (*Thiruvanjikulam* - Trissur District in Kerala). These murals could have been depicted in the 18th century.

Conclusion:

In India, religion is a way of life. It is an integral part of the Indian tradition. The history of Indian Music includes not merely the glowing account of its composers and their achievements

[8] Swasthikasana : Standing with right foot crossed over his left foot

but also the development of art experienced within itself, changes in the birth of new basic concepts, the development of new instrument and introduction of new styles of compositions. This research work aims to explain and bring forth hitherto commonly unknown information and details of science of instrument Vina that lie hidden in architecture and Iconography. And the roles those sacred temples have played in preserving and propagating the music over the centuries. The slabs engraved with compositions and musical sculptures, musical instrument and musicians within the temple enclosure show the heredity of music.

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List of Plates

1. Goddess Parvathi represent a Vina – Kailasanatha Temple – Tamil Nadu
2. Vina represented by a lady with Swasthikasana – Sarabeswara Temple Thribhuvanam – Tamil Nadu
3. Lady Playing a fretted Vina – Sarabeswara Temple – Thribhuvanam – Tamil Nadu
4. Rudra Vina Player – Sreerangam Temple – Tamil Nadu
5. Rudra Vina Player – Chidambaram Temple – Tamil Nadu
6. Rudra Vina Player – Vadapathrasayi Temple – Tamil Nadu
7. Nagaveena Player with Swasthikasana – Mayavaram – Tamil Nadu
8. Nagavina Player – Mayavaram – Tamil Nadu
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13. Goddess playing a fretted Vina – Koothanur – Tamil Nadu (Collected from official Website of the temple)
14. Goddess Saraswati Playing Fretted Vina – Rameswaram – Tamil Nadu
15. Mural Painting depicted Chatura Tandava of Lord Siva holding a fretted Vina – Thiruvanchikulam – Kerala
16. Mural Painting depicted fretted Vina – BrihadeeswraTemple – Tamil Nadu



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