Preface

The Great temple of Rājārājaśvara also called Brhadiśvara is a visual representation of Cosmic power on earth, that remains according to the pious wish of the builder, so long as the sun and moon lasts. The God who inhabits this abode is said to be seated with his consort on the summit of the metaphysical mountain, surrounded by a circle of peaks in which the divine power descends in diminishing potency as it comes down gradually and takes his abode at the peak of the circle, appropriate to his direction and also the relative importance in the hierarchy. So each śringa is a virtual temple. This enables the devotee to see the image of his devotion within his immediate reach. This metaphysical mountain is called the great Mēru – Mahāmēru, which forms the basic concept of the Brhadiśvara temple of Tanjore. All the meanings mentioned in ancient Indian literature about Mēru and its encircling peaks are incorporated in the physical temple by Rājarāja, the builder, in the Brhadiśvara temple which he called the Southern Mēru, the Daksīṇa Mēru. He consecrated two important metal images in this temple, one called “Mahāmēru Viṭtankar” and the other called “Daksīṇa Mēru Viṭtankar” as if emphasizing the concept. Mēru, the mythical mountain is said to be a golden mountain. True to its nature, Rājarāja covered the superstructure of this temple with gold, that made this loftiest golden temple at that time. The images one sees on the upper tiers represented with bow and arrow in their arms are the innumerable Rudras called Sata-rudras, who are said to move in the upper spheres and represent the sun’s rays, a representation unique to this temple. This temple also portrays the five forms of Pañca Brahmaṇs – Tatpurūsa, Aghōra, Sadyojāta, Vamadeva and Iśāna, in individual sculptural forms and enshrined in the lower niches. Besides, other manifestations of Śiva, distributed in niches also are the personified weapons Āyudha-puruṣas as Duḥrapālas. With four sides of the sanctum provided with openings and its height exactly double its width at the base, the lofty tower fulfils all requirements of the Mēru type of temple architecture. The Brhadiśvara temple locates for the first time in Indian history, the 108 forms of nṛtta karaṇas on the upper storey, around the sanctum wall in sculptural form and reflects the concept of cosmic space in which Śiva’s dance takes place. The dance sculptures follow strictly the sequence given in Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra, are contemporary with the famous Abhinavagupta whose outstanding commentary had not then reached Tanjore at the time of its construction. The available karaṇas are discussed in this volume for the first time in the light of Abhinavagupta’s commentary and also the
views of modern scholars. The unique character of the front manḍapa, and the enclosure and the two gopuras are also dealt with.

Interestingly, this royal temple had a few structures added during subsequent centuries like the Amman shrine, Subrahmanya shrine, Nataraj shrine and Ganēśa shrine which were also built by kings, like the Amman shrine by a Pāṇḍya in 1400 C.E. Subrahmanya temple by the Nāyak in 16th century, and the Nataraja and Ganēśa shrines by the Marāthā ruler in 1800. Thus, it is a total royal temple. The enclosure built by the commander-in-chief of Rājarāja gives the temple a lay out of Śiva Rajadhanī. Every structure in the temple is dated with the help of inscriptions. The story is taken through the centuries and its change in meaning and ritual are brought out in this volume which point out what a Hindu temple mean when in full form and through the centuries. The personality of the builder, the role of Rāja-gurū in planning and guidance and also the names of architects who designed and carved the sculptures and executed the lovely paintings are also furnished in this volume which makes it an invaluable work on the temple.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, who worked tirelessly for the documentation, study and publication of Indian art and culture, conceived the Bṛhatīśvara project when she witnessed the great abhisheka performed to that great linga Rājarājēśvara at Tanjore. When the milk was poured over the linga from hundreds of pots and the milk was descending in waves like the celestial Gaṅgā coming down from ikṣaṇa (outer space) it provided the inspiration for the project. Dr. Kapila ji took keen interest in the project that was conceived in several modules like measured architectural drawings, iconographic programme, epigraphic wealth and paintings. The first volume consisting of architectural drawing by Dr. Pichard of the École Française D’Extrême-Orient has already come out. This volume on iconography was in the press when Madame L’Hermault who undertook photography of Tanjore temple suddenly passed away, so the volume on iconography was brought out in her memory. This volume got long delayed, due to causes beyond our control.

I express my profound thanks to Dr. Kapila ji for all encouragement she gave me in this project, and but for whose enthusiastic and scholarly support this project would not have come to fruition. I am glad to note that the present Member Secretary, IGNCA, Dr. Jyotindra Jain is evincing equally great interest and I thank him for this gesture. I am also thankful to Dr. Molly Kaushal, Head, Jarsapada Sampada Division and Dr. B.L. Mall, Senior Research Officer, for their active support of this work. I thank Shri Vikas Arya for bringing out this volume neatly.

R. Nagaswamy
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