

## Introduction

When the Vedic *r̥ṣis* in their ecstatic state of contemplation poured forth the immortal poem, “Tinier than the atom and far greater than the greatest, the pulsating force resides in the deep inner chamber of the living consciousness (*anōr aṇīyān mahatōṛ mahīyān ātmā asya jantōr nihitam guhāyām*)”, they were only exclaiming about the ever-expanding joy of comprehending the cosmos, which they called by the name Brahman.

The Supreme is called Brahman because it continues to expand ever into the macrocosm. *Brahmanāt Brahmam ityuktm* defines an ancient saying. From the microcosm of the mind emerges the macrocosm of the Universe. If the mind divests itself of agitations and reposes in the purity of nature, it sees outside itself a captivating form; in turns it into the same mind which reaches the summit of visualisation, like the great Himalayas. The physical Himalayan mountain exists as the loftiest peak but to limit the Supreme abode even to the greatest of physical form will entail placing limitations on the poetic potential. So, the Indian mind created Mēru, the supreme abode which is beyond Himalayas, the physical form. Himavān is only a part of the Mēru, the abode of Śiva; Mēru and Himavān are identical in effect. The same seen in its physical form is called Himalayas but when visualised in its metaphysical form it is Mēru – the *rūpa* and *arūpa*. The Indian mind was aware that only through form (the *rūpa*), the formless *arūpa* could be comprehended. The movement is from *rūpa* (form) to beyond.

According to the Śaiva mode of worshipping Śiva, the worshipper first invokes Śiva inside his own self, made fit by purification, who is then brought out and projected on an object of worship – either a *liṅga* or a sculpture – to which worship is offered in a set order, beginning from the establishment of a relationship between the worshipper and the object of worship, called *āvāhana*. The *liṅga*, always worshipped as the supreme effulgent light – *param jyōtis* – is identical with cosmic knowledge (*jñānamūrti*). At the end of the worship, the projected imagery is withdrawn into the mind of worshipper. The grandeur of the created form is proportionate to the great strength of the mind of the devotee (*yajamāna*) and his spiritual guide (*ācārya*) assisted by the maker of the form – the *rūpakāra*. When the three work in absolute union and harmony, then comes forth greatest of form, both in its aesthetic appeal and longevity (according the Āgamic ritual treatises).

However, the role of the last, the *rūpakāra* comes to an end with this creation, but the other two, the *yajamāna* and the *guru*, infuse life into it by hymnal invocations, *mantras* and offerings that are sustained so long as the sun and moon endure according to the prayer made at the time of consecration.

To fathom the minds that conceived such a magnificent form, visualised its nature, and gave it a physical existence by a meticulously designed layout, a rhythmic articulation of its various limbs and projection of related meanings, ushering in a harmony of form and essence, is an exercise of joy.

No other monumental edifice is capable of giving better opportunity to such an exercise of aesthetic yoga than the Bṛhadīśvara temple of Tanjavur, built by Rājarāja Cōḷa I (AD 1010), who was guided by his *guru*, Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita, and it was executed by the architect Rājarāja-perum-taccan. An inscription of Rājarāja Cōḷa I discovered by me reveals for the first time, the complete iconography of a metal image (copper) called Mahāmēru-Viṭankar consecrated by Rājarāja, which consists of Śiva with his consort Pārvatī, seated on the mountain Mēru with his two sons, Gaṇēśa and Subrahmaṇya, and other deities like Sūrya, Candra, Vṛṣabha, dwarfs and a tree. Such a group of images on the mountain Mēru, made of metal, is unique in the history of South India and has not been known to exist or has been referred to anywhere in Tamil Nadu. Another image made of copper also consecrated by Rājarāja was called Dakṣiṇa Mēru-Viṭankar alias Āḍavallār, the dancing form of Naṭarāja. These two images – Mahāmēru-Viṭankar and Dakṣiṇa-Mēru-Viṭankar – are mentioned as the two principal metal images in the temple in many inscriptions. They point to the fact that the whole temple was visualised by Rājarāja as Dakṣiṇa Mēru. The Mahāmēru, the legendary mountain, as the abode of Umāmahēśvara is only a mythical form and does not exist except in poetic imagery, while Dakṣiṇa-mēru, the abode of the Supreme Dancer, does exist in physical form. In the vision of the builder of the great temple of Tanjore, Mēru was the underlying concept, the very physical abode (in the south) of Śiva in his dancing form of Naṭarāja. Mēru is the golden mountain of radiating luminosity and true to its concept, Rājarāja covered the *vimāna* of the great temple of Tanjavur with gold plates mentioned in an inscription, also recently noticed by me in the temple for the first time.

With Mēru as the basic concept this temple has been structured and erected. The iconography of the temple is coterminous with the iconography of Mahāmēru, graphically portrayed in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Purāṇas* and the Āgamic literature. When viewed in this perspective, the sculpted icons at different levels of the *śikhara*, fall perfectly in their place as the abodes in minor mounts surrounding the great peak, manifesting the meaning of their iconographic programme. The iconographic study has to be based not only on the sculptures but the entire temple as a whole.

A new dimension is added by the discovery of another inscription, also noticed by me in the temple, recording the consecration of metal images of *Āyudha puruṣas*, icons of personified weapons, set up by Rājarāja in the temple, pointing to the emphatic ritual formulae that underlined the iconographic form of this temple. Dr. Stella Kramrisch has admirably summed up this factor in her magnum opus, *The Hindu Temple* – that ritual action and architectural form express one and the same meaning. The sculpture of the temple accompanies, follows, and translates into a relative permanence, the rites and their rhythmic formulas (*The Hindu Temple*, p. 165). I have already drawn attention to this fact in my paper on the 'Iconography and significance of the Bṛhadīśvara temple' presented at the symposium on the 'Manifestations of Śiva'. The study of the iconography of this temple is also against

the background of Āgamic rituals associated with this temple – the *Makuṭāgama*. This study is based on the concept of Mēru and the prescribed ritual in *Makuṭāgama*.

That the Hindu temple could be understood only at a multi-disciplinary level, was revealed to me by His Holiness Sri Chandrasekharendra Sarasvati Swamikal, the seniormost Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti *pīṭha*, who lived up to the ripe age of 100, in a seminar organised by him for twelve days at Ilayattamkudi over 40 years ago. Experts in the fields of architecture, sculpture, paintings, crafts, music, dance, ritual and philosophy deliberated and pointed to the emergence of all these branches from one sacred tree – the immortal Hindu Temple. During one of the sessions the great *ācārya* took me aside and taught me in seclusion, the two basic approaches of Indian tradition, the paths of externalisation and internalisation (*Pravritti mārga and Nivritti mārga*), for nearly four hours/both essential, but the former leads to the latter. I owe all my understanding of the subject to the personal teachings of this greatest of Indian sages who lived amidst us.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has been the foremost inspirer of my academic pursuits for over four decades now. Kapilaji is not new to Tamil Nadu. She has travelled to remote villages in Tamil Nadu, to study the temples, at times accompanied by me. During one such visit, I had the privilege and pleasure of taking her to Tanjavur and Gangaikonda Cōḷapuram, when a *Mahābhiṣeka* was performed to the great *liṅga*, Mahādeva; when pots of milk were poured continuously over the *liṅga*. It flowed over the smooth surface of the *liṅga* reminding one the celestial Gaṅgā, descending from the heaven in an uninterrupted flow of waves. A feeling of ascending the vast space above was felt by the spectator every moment. This unique experience made Kapilaji exclaim that we should make a mega study of this great temple of Tanjavur and thus was born the Br̥hadīśvara project. She conferred on me the great opportunity to undertake a comprehensive study, giving me valuable guidelines and creating the necessary infrastructure and assistance. That such a scientific institution of global outlook could be created, sustained and pursued vigorously is a tribute to her vision and capabilities and I am ever grateful to her for the opportunity, her scholarly guidance, and the means to pursue this work which I cherish.

The French Institute of Indology, Pondicherry, then headed by Francoise Gros, readily agreed to my suggestion to collaborate on this venture. Mr. Pierre Pichard undertook to prepare excellent architectural drawings and study, which have appeared as Volume I in the series. Dr. Françoise L'Hernault took up the photographic documentation of the great temple. I am thankful to them for the great number of drawings and photographs used in this volume.

There are several scholars whom I would like to mention for their enthusiastic participation in discussions which enlarged my perception. The list is so vast that I prefer to remember their invisible voices than to name them.

Lastly, I owe my duty to all my family members, my wife Pārvatī, and to my grandson Brahadisvar, who encouraged me and allowed me the necessary leisure to pursue this study.