

CAR FESTIVAL IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT - A STUDY

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Introduction:

The festivals are significant because they bring people of various sects, castes and classes nearer to each other. They bring unity and solidarity amidst multifarious diversities. They make the people to be happy. Without any exception people of all religious orders celebrate various festivals according to their tastes and conveniences. It must be remembered that fasting and feasts are also associated with the festivals. In addition to that it is evident that festivals have caused the introduction of specific ceremonies, customs and traditions.¹ The Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Parsees and others have their own religious festivals. They celebrate them according to the principles of their own religious faiths. Without any deviation that are celebrated in a particular month in auspicious and appropriate days. The festivals in India manifest the living force pulsating in its culture. The Indian mind carved out three categories of festivals. The festivals of India enshrine and keep alive men and ideals that have left their impression over the history of the race.²

According to spiritual scriptures, it is essential to celebrate festivals for the installed deities. When festivals are celebrated, the general public gets an opportunity to witness the occasion with certain entertainment to see their revered deities in the celebration. Tirunelveli district has perhaps the largest number of religious celebrations every year. Tirunelveli district is a land of temples. The temples and festivals go together. Festivals are not only religious occasions but also cultural and commercial land marks. They are part of the life of the people. They help family re-unions. People meet at festivals which are designed to ensure individual happiness commingled with social joy and domestic éclat. Most of the temple festivals take place during September – October and in the post-harvest months of March – June.³ The duration of each festival is from three to ten days more. The main deity is draped in colorful bright costumes and adorned with valuable and rare items of jewellery of the distant past. The deity is mounted on specially constructed mounts called *Vahanams* and taken round the temple in processions.

Religious Festivals:

The religious festivals have been playing a vital role in the daily Indian especially South Indian life by providing abundant opportunities by paving the path towards spiritual salvation besides a mundane pleasure and the required inspiration to the entire humanity. The Hindu festivals are designed by great sages of old. In olden days, they were not only places of worship, but also centers of social and cultural life. They were maintained both by royal benefaction and public patronage. The monarchs bestowed particular attention to the upkeep of the religious institution. Not only did they tolerate religious sects other than their own, but, they patronised all persuasions in equal measure.⁴ Inscriptions constitute the chief source of information for the study of the Hindu temples of Tirunelveli district. The festivals are not compulsory but they add colour and grandeur to the temples. They are great occasions when the devotees from even the distant places gather to take part in the celebration. But their scale and grandeur are determined by the financial resources of the temple and the benefactions of devotees. The temples of Tirunelveli district is richly endowed with provisions for the daily offerings as well as a number of festivals which have, in the course of centuries, become famous for their grandeur and beauty.⁵ It is the core-ritual of the temple worship it has a powerful sensual impact on the devotees. This is enhanced by the sound of musical instrument combined with the ringing of bells and the chanting of the sacred texts.

The Brahmotsavam or Car Festival:

The *Brahmotsavam* starts by hoisting the flag, having a picture of the *Rishaba*, on the top of the flag stand (*dwajasthamba*) after due rituals. After that *Adikaranandi* is taken out in a procession on the first day. During the *Brahmotsavam*, the images of the gods and goddess, decorated with gold, silver jewellery and colourful flowers, are carried out in procession maimed on various *vahanas* to different *Mandagapadis* arranged by the temple authorities.⁶ The success of the car festival depends upon the process of taking the cars along the concourse. The mechanism of car operation is designed in a very simple manner, involving a difficult mode of operation. Its success to a great extent depends upon the condition of the car street and the car wheels. In the rainy season it is very difficult to move the cars since chances for entanglement of wheels in muddy meshes are frequent. On the eve of the festival, the wheels and axles checked and minor repairs done. At the time of *ratharohana*, the car pullers hold the *vadam* and pull them with all their might.

Some men from behind the two outer back wheels apply a wooden lever called *tadi* with a view to push the wheel forward. As a result of both these forces, the standing car gives way and moves slowly. Since there is no automatic mechanism to arrest its movement while moving, some men run along as the front wheels by constantly applying a hurdle called *Kudil* (literally obstacle) across the wheels. This serves as a break and makes the car move slowly and steadily. The process works out well as long as the car moves in a straight road. In case it is to turn sidewise, trouble comes. Often big ones such as the car at Tiruchendur stand at corners for hours together, unable to turn sidewise. Vinayagar, Siva and Amman are taken in procession on the car.⁷ Amman and Siva are combinely taken in procession around the holy tank called Teppotsava, the festival of float for eleven times on the night of the 10th day of Panguni festival. The festival marks the conclusion of the prime annual temple festival and it is celebrated with as much pomp and éclat as the Brahmotsavam. The lay-out of the temple precincts and the processional pathways are almost identical. The main entrance of the temple faces a rather large tank, square in shape and having on all sides symmetrically laid steps of granite, red laterite rectangular slabs leading down. There is a perfect geometrical symmetry in the four sides and the steps. In the centre of the tank is a structure which is more an elevated covered platform in granite red laterite slabs. The belief probably is that the deity having concluded his ceremonial perambulation with all the attendant paraphernalia on land, must have his aquatic sojourn before he returns to the sanctum of the temple to come out only for the next festival.⁸

Theppotsavam:

The float is a large raft, on the day fixed for Theppotsavam the image of the deity, elaborately and exquisitely decorated is placed on the raft which is drawn around the water in the tank to the accompaniment of loud chant of Vedic, mantras, hymns and prayers. The float is moved to the mandapam in the middle of the tank. The Gandhimathi Nellaiyappar temple is famous for the Teppotsava.⁹ The images of the deity is lifted to a special dais erected in the mandapam and worship in elaborate customary style is then offered to the deity. After the worship, the image is brought back to the temple. The huge congregations of pilgrims watch the Theppotsavam festival. It is believed that the idea behind the Theppam festival is that an opportunity to be presented to the aquatic beings also to worship the deity at least once a year. The illumination from thousands of lights placed on all sides of the tank and the presence of thousands of devotees enthusiastically watching the ceremonial round of the deity through the tank make it a wonderful sight not to be missed by devout pilgrims. The tenth day is the end of the *Brahmothsavam*.¹⁰ On the morning, a special *abhisheka* is performed

to Lord Siva and then a procession is undertaken. Subsequently, the temple flag is lowered down. This marks the end of *Brahmotsavam* festival. Finally, the celebration of *Thirumanjanam* put an end to this festival. In addition to the above said car festival, there are some other monthly festivals also celebrated in the temples of Tirunelveli district. They are Vasantha utsavam in the Tamil month of Chitrai (April-May), Vaikasi Visakam in the month of Vaikasi (May-June), Brahmotsavam in the month of Ani (June-July), Adipuram in the month of Adi (July-August), Avani-Mulam festival in the month of Avani (August-September), Navaratri festival in the month of Purattasi (September-October), Kartigai Deepam in the month of Karthigai (November-December), Tai-pusa festival in the month of Tai (January- February) and Mahasivaratri festival in the month of Masi (February-March).¹¹

The Uniqueness of the Car Festival:

In Hindu religious practice, it is accepted as a significant part of the festivities and ceremonies of each temple. The uniqueness of the Car Festival lies in the participation of the presiding deities in the journey, being accompanied by their representatives. The concept of the Car Festival at Tirunelveli district constitutes a copious consideration in the campus of the temple consciousness. Out of thirteen grand celebrations (Yatras), the Car Festival is evaluated as the most predominantly prevalent one for its multanimous values. Moreover, it has accumulated universal acceptance so magnanimously that ardent enthusiasts celebrate it with celestial passion and ceremonial fashion even beyond the territory of Indian peninsula.¹² Apart from being one of the biggest festivals of Lord, car festival is considered magnanimous from the view points of sanctity, ritualistic exhibition and philosophical significance. Its hoary antiquity is corroborated by different spiritual literary sources and epigraphic evidences. The history of the Car Festival in Tirunelveli district, like the history of the God's consciousness is absorbed in obscurity. The origin and antiquity of car festival might be interpreted in connection with ritualistic evolution. The scholastic review of ritualistic reformations in India reveals the fact that by the 2nd century BC, the *Pancharatra* form of worship gained greater popularity in North India.¹³ The Car Festivals of Hindu temples in Tirunelveli district has an illustrious uniqueness among all the mythological celebrations in the campus of Hinduism. Though no definite date regarding its antiquity has been unanimously accepted yet, it has been celebrated with isometric continuance over a cycle of centuries, highlighting religious unity, socio-cultural synthesis and egalitarian values. In the spontaneous display of emotion and devotion, the Car Festival seems to be one of the grand colourful celebrations in the world.¹⁴ Previously professional chariot pullers were being appointed to drag the chariots. At present the chariots are dragged by

the hilarious people in support of the police officials. Thousands of people grab the long ropes attached to the cars and begin to pull them. The macroscopic practices affixed to the Car Festival is appallingly appealing. Its ingrained beauty lies in paving an in-depth understanding of inner subjectivity.

Gandhimathi Nellaiyappar Temple:

On the surface, the celebration seems supreme, when Gandhimathi Nellaiyappar temple amid a huge congregation of devotees astride on His chariot. The universality of car festival at Tirunelveli district is not only presidential but also ponderous. Of the important festivals celebrated in the campus of Lord Gandhimathi Nellaiyappar, this occasion is both important and interesting.¹⁵ This is an event which makes the Gods descend to the common forum. They merge with human beings, with the same sentiments and sensitiveness. Hence, the Gods assume the garb of human beings and human beings assume the role of the Gods. The concept of Car Festival is explicitly synonymous with society and spirituality. It constitutes a vehement aspect of Hinduism. Being originated from the Tirunelveli soil it has gained worldly favour for its charismatic spell and influence. Car festival is the famous festival celebrated at Gandhimathi Nellaiyappar temple which is at a distance of 2.kms from the Thirunelveli railway station. Also known as 'Aani festival', this festival that falls during the month of June-July, is celebrated for 10 days with great splendor and cheer.¹⁶ The annual car festival of Nellaiyappar Temple of Tirunelveli is one of the popular celebrations that attract lakhs of devotees from all over Tamil Nadu. The festival commences with the flag hoisting and on the 9th day a grand procession with the idols of Swamy Nellaiyappar and Gandhimathi Ambal is carried out. The chariot used for the procession is the 3rd largest car in Tamil Nadu and is 450 ton in weight, 28 feet in width, 28 feet in length with a total height of 35 feet.¹⁷ This chariot with the idols are pulled by the devotees through the all four car streets around the temple. The car is a marvel on wood with exquisite carving depicting incidents from the Puranas. It is used to take even six months for the car to reach the destination as the car was pulled only by people. The melodious music from '*Bari Nadaswaram*' unique to the temple and the *Thevaram* versions rendered by the Odhuvar enhance the divine atmosphere. The important occasion is a temple festival is the day of the car festival which is usually on the seventh day other important car festivals are celebrated at Tirunelveli, Tiruchendur, Srivilliputhur, Alvar Tirunagari and Srivaikundam.¹⁸

Conclusion:

The socio-cultural significance of the great Car Festival is splendid as well as extensive. It is said to be an institution by itself. The genesis might be mysterious and its growth might be enigmatic; but its spread has

been worldwide and influence has been humanistic. One of the most representative features of the car festival lies in the presence of sister with brothers. The affection of the elders for the younger one is indicative for the common men. The specificity of the chariots spectacularly represents the philosophic aspects of human life. Besides its deep religious inviolability, spiritual sanctity, aesthetic charisma, the Car Festival has magnificent influence over the socio-cultural trend of Tirunelveli district. As a result, the celebration symbolizes convergence of spiritualism.

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