



THE APEX AND CULMINATION OF MURUKAN CULT IN TAMIL NADU FROM A.D. 850 DOWN TO A.D. 1250

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Cite This Article: Dr. P. Rajan, "The Apex and Culmination of Murukan Cult in Tamil Nadu from A.D. 850 Down to A.D. 1250", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 2, Issue 2, Page Number 259-263, 2017.

Abstract:

Lord Murukan is as old as the cult, which has taken a hold in the Tamil speaking land. The cult has provided a rich field for the study of religions, literature, sculpture, iconography and temple architecture. The Cholas contribution in the field of art was distinctive and significant. The Cholas were great builders of temples. During the Chola period Tamil and Sanskrit literature were extensively encouraged. They shed light on the Lord Murukan worship. Apart from the literature, the monuments connected with His cult are very helpful to analyse the further development and the zenith of Lord Murukan cult in the Tamil Country. This paper focus on development and zenith of Murukan cult in four stages, they are Lord. Murukan as a *parivara* deity, *vimana* deity, presiding deity and *gopura* deity. In addition to that this paper examines to trace the development and the zenith of Murukan cult from A.D. 850 down to A.D. 1250.

Key Words: Pantheon, Synchronization, Iconography, Interpreters, Myths, Parivara, Vimana, Gopura, Alaya, Canonical, Devakostha, Mulatala, Duvarapalas, Ardhmandapa, Keshetrapala, Grivakostha, Antarala & Mukhamandapa.

Introduction

Religion has been playing a very significant role in the life of mankind since very early times. It has been the basis of Indian thought and life and guiding principle of Indian Civilization through the ages. In the early period, the religious life of the people must have been, influenced by fear and sustained by hope. Later on trees having been regarded as sacred, the residing spirits in them were worshipped. Lord Murukan is as old as the cult, which has taken a hold in the Tamil speaking land.

In due course Lord Murukan was included in the Vedic- pantheon as a result of synchronization of Aryan and Dravidian cults in South India and caused virtually many changes in the cultural history of Tamil civilization. The cult has provided a rich field for the study of religions, literature, sculpture, iconography and temple architecture. An attempt is made in the following pages to trace the development and the zenith of Murukan cult from A.D. 850 down to A.D. 1250.

The period between the second half of the ninth century A.D. to the first half of the twelfth century A.D. witnessed the growth and the zenith of Murukan cult under the enlightened Tamil monarchs in Tamil speaking land. In this respect, the Cholas not only installed various forms of Lord Siva but also of other deities. Of these deities the most important was Lord Murukan, the patron deity of the hill, who over shadowed the Aryan deities like Skanda-Karttikeya.

Apart from the political climate the cultural conditions also favoured much the development of the Lord Murukan cult. The age of the Chola may be said to be the beginning of the Golden age of Tamil Culture.¹ The period of their rule was characterized by a revival of Hinduism.² Society was predominantly orthodox in religious practices, there was great encouragement to art and literature. Upanishadic and Puranic themes were fully used. Words and concepts in ethics, religion and philosophy were freely translated into Tamil. The hymns of Nayanmars and Alvars were¹ collected together and codified by Nambiander Nambi³ and Nathamuni. The hymnists propagated the concept of Bhakti, which led to the growth of temples in Tamilaham.

The cultural growth of this age contributed a marked- change in the field of art and architecture. The Cholas contribution in the field of art was distinctive and significant. They were not imitators or reproducers but interpreters. Though the Cholas and their subjects worshipped many deities in-the Hindu Pantheon, Lord Murukan, the most important deity was revered in many different forms. The Cholas were great builders of temples. Forty eight such temples of Aditya-I have been identified. Of these one of them is dedicated to Lord Murukan. The progressive growth and the zenith of the cult of Lord Murukan as is seen in the literature and monuments (icons and temples) are given in detail.

During the Chola period Tamil and Sanskrit literature were extensively encouraged. They shed light on the Lord Murukan worship and various myths relating to different forms of the. Lord as well. Apart from the literature, the monuments connected with His cult are very helpful to analyse the further growth and the zenith of Lord Murukan cult in the Tamil Country. The development is seen in four stages, 'they are Lord. Murukan as a *parivara* deity, *vimana* deity, presiding deity and *gopura* deity.

The Cholas built temples on the solid and splendid foundation laid, by the Pallavas. The enlargement of the temple dimensions and installation of various images of Gods in the sub-shrines had always been dictated by the worship of larger and yet larger number of subsidiary deities. The fixation and consolidation of these deities

are variously called *parivara* deities.⁴ Kasyapa Silpa Sastra⁵ states that the names of the eight *parivara* deities. They are *Vrshaba-deva* (nandi), *Agni deva* or *Agni*, *Durgai*, (*Saptamatas*), *Virabhadra*, *Vinayaka* (*Ganapathi*), *Shanmugha* (*Murukan*), *Jyestha*, *Visnu* or *Katyayani* and *Surya*. According to *Mayamatam* the *parivara alaya* images to be installed are *Vrshaba*, *Ganapati*, *Brahma*, *Materikas*, *Guhan* (*Murukan*), *Aryan*, *Achyutan* and *Chandesan*. The work also describes temples, which may have 16, 24 or 32 sub shrines.

In their early Siva temples constructed during the second half of the ninth century A.D., the images of Lord *Murukan* (*Subrahmanya*) are found in one of its sub shrines⁶ (*parivara alaya*). From this it is clear that the installation of *Murukan* image in the sub shrines was initiated by the Cholas for the first time in *Tamilham*. The earliest example of Lord *Murukan* in the form of *Subrahmanya* is seen in one of the seven *parivara* shrines of the *Sundaresvarar* temple at *Tirukkattalai*.⁷ In order to understand the evolution of the new status of Lord *Murukan* as *parivara* deity, it is essential to know the date of the temple. The temple at *Tirukkattalai* has twelve inscriptions, of which the earlier inscription is found on the northern wall of the central shrine. It mentions one *Rajakesarivarman*, who could be identified as the son and successor of *Vijayalaya* and the father of *Parantaka* namely. *Chola Aditya-I*.⁸ It states that the installation of *Murukan* images in the *parivara* shrines should have begun in A.D. 874.

How this *parivara* shrines came into being is also important for the study. The early temples of *Tamil Country* have always been unitary in character. The evolution of *parivara* shrines in *Tamil Country* is entirely an independent development of *Vijayalaya I*. It is evident from the edifice of the *Vijayalaya Cholisvaram* temple at *Narttamalai*. The temple has a main shrine in the centre with eight sub shrines all round facing the main temple.⁹ It is one of the earliest and grandest of the structural stone temples of the Cholas.¹⁰ It reveals that the practice of construction of *parivara* shrines came into being even from the days of *Vijayalaya* (the first half of the ninth century A.D.).

The basement of the eight sub shrines of the *Vijayalaya Cholisvaram* clearly reveal that there was every possibility of the worship of Lord *Murukan* as a *parivara* deity even during the time of *Vijayalaya-I*, and the same was continued by the -subsequent monarchs in almost all their temples. The forms like *Subrahmanya*, *Senani* and *Devasenapathi* stand as the best examples of Lord *Murukan* as a *parivara* deity. This ritual of installing various deities in the sub shrines began in the "North Indian temples by about the eighth century A.D."¹¹ The earlier one was known the *panchayatana*¹² form of worship. It was employed in the *Tamil speaking land* during the period of the later Cholas. In order to honour the other deities in their temple premise the Cholas installed various images of the Gods of the *Saiva* tradition. Of these deities", the most important was that of Lord *Murukan*.¹³

The reason for the installation of Lord *Murukan* images in the sub shrines and in the *vimanas* was due to the policies of propagating the canonical religion and the pressure of canonization directed against native cults gave rise to the incorporation of localized cults into a religious order linked to the royal cult of *Siva*. This attempt was supported by the existing literature both the devotional and non-religious historical works.

The tradition on the *Saiva* temples in the *Tamilharn* was characterised by the central main shrine being that of *Siva* with Lord *Murukan* in the north west. Under this circumstance the Cholas in their temple architecture introduced "the multiplication of the *parivara* shrines in their temple construction, also paved the way to install shrines. On this distribution a place on the western side was assigned to Lord *Murukan*.

The *Chola* phase (A.D. 850-1100) was a period of grand *vimanas*. This style of architecture is found in the large scale of monuments of this epoch. The noblest artistic expression of the Cholas is found in the (*devakostha*) *vimana* sculptures of the *Siva* temples in *Tamilham*. This kind of installation and worship of images on the outer walls of the cave temples was initiated by the *Pallavas*. The successive Cholas continued and expanded the practice of installing the images of Gods and Goddesses on their *vimana*.

Vimana deities are installed mostly in the *devakostha* round the *garbhagraha*, but also in the upper talas, one or more as the case may be and in the *kosthas* of the *griva*.¹⁴ According to *Mayamatam*¹⁵ in the *mulatala* of the *vimana*, the deities to be prescribed are in the east *duvarapalas* or *Nandikesa* and *Kalan*, in the south *Dakshinamurthi*, in the west *Mahavisnu* or *Lingodbhavar* and in the north *Brahmadevar*. According to *slipa text*¹⁶ *Isana sivagurudeva prodhati*, the images should be installed in the different quarters, *Dakshinamurthi* in the south, *Lingodbhavar* or *Visnu* or any other of His manifestations in the west and *Durga* or *Brahma* in the north. An image of *Vinayaga* may be set up in the wall of the *ardhamandapa*, while a *keshetrपाला* may be sculptured in the north-eastern corner. Among the various deities the images of Lord *Murukan* also appear in the niche of the *vimana* both in the *devakostha* and *grivakostha* as well and worshipped as a *vimana* deity.

For earlier evidence, on the eastern side *devakostha* niche of the *Agastesvaram* temple at *Kilaiyur* a standing figure of *Subrahmanya* form of *Murukan* is seen.¹⁷ A seated image of *Subrahmanya* like *Dhakshinamurthi* is also found on the eastern *devakostha* niche of the *Arunachaleswaram* temple at *Kilaiyur*.¹⁸ The above mentioned two examples are helpful to assign the data of the worship of Lord *Murukan* as a *vimana* deity. The earliest inscriptions of the *Kilaiyur* temples belong to the thirteenth regnal year of *Rajakesarivarman*, who is identified with *Aditya I*.¹⁹ From this it is clear that the worship of Lord *Murukan* as a *vimana* deity was continued by the Cholas from the second half of the ninth century A.D. The same (earliest)

inscriptions of the temple are also helpful to trace the reason for the installation of Murukan images and His worship.

One of the earliest inscriptions of the temple of the twin shrines dated in the thirteenth regnal year of Aditya I refer to a gift of land for burning a perpetual lamp in each of the twin shrines under the orders of Paluvettariyan Kumaran Kandan. On the southern wall of the same shrine there is another inscription dated in the twenty second regnal year of Aditya I which mentions on Paluvettariyan Kumaran Maran and records a gift of land for burning a perpetual lamp in the same shrine.

From the two earlier epigraphs of the twin shrines of Avanikandarpalsvaram, it is clear that the Paluvettariyans were the feudatories of the imperial Cholas.²⁰ They were ruling over a small territory round paluvur in the Trichirapalli District and Kilaiyur was one of their headquarters. They were great devotees of Lord Murukan. From this it is clear that probably the Paluvettariyans one of the feudatories in their headquarters at Kilaiyur had erected the twin shrines under the order of Aditya I. In doing so they might have installed the images of Lord Murukan in the *devakostha* niche of the *vimanas* of Avanikandarbalsvaram temple. Due to their regard for Murukan and their influence over the Cholas might be the reason for the installation of Murukan images in the *vimanas*.

The Chola monarchs and their subjects worshipped various deities of the Hindu Pantheon. It is evident by the existence of innumerable temples of those days. Of these deities Lord Siva, as the most important deity was revered in many forms. Apart from the Siva worship separate temples were constructed for Lord Murukan, Ganesa and Surya. For instance, the Balasubrahmanya temple at Kannanur²¹ and Sri Subrahmanya Swami temple at Uthiramerur²² bear all the features of the Siva temples in the contemporary period with Murukan as the presiding deity.

The Balasubrahmanya temple consists of the *garbhagraha*, *antarala* and *mukhamandapa*. Not a structural stone temple was dedicated to the primal worship of Lord Murukan until the emergence of the Balasubrahmanya temple at Kannanur. The date of the temple is assigned with the help of two inscriptions found on the eastern wall of the *antarala* of the door way obtained. But the details available in the limited exposed portion of the epigraphs are helpful to fix the date of the temple. The first two lines of the epigraph mention the phrase Kovikesarripanmar. The term is identified with Rajakesarivarman, who is none other than Aditya I.²³ From the two mutilated parts the main deity came to be known as Subrahmanya Devar.

A close examination of the temples of the period proves the remarkable growth and the zenith of the cult. Representing the efflorescence of the Murukan cult the Chola architecture responded to the creative age of the times and contributed its character and richness to the progress of the art. The reason for the erection of Balasubrahmanya temple for His worship as the presiding deity began from a religious background. The period is known as the Silver age of Saivism. The presiding status has been given to other Gods and Goddesses like Lord Murukan, Ganesa, Surya and Durga. In this religious trend the importance of Murukan worship influenced the erection of a temple not only to Lord Siva but also to Lord Murukan. It was inspired by religious fervour of Lord Murukan. Their intense faith and sense of dedication motivated the Cholas.

The temple architecture of the Cholas postulates a threefold division namely the early, middle and later Chola periods. Of these divisions, the later Chola period marked the evolution of the installation of the Murukan images on the outer *gopuras* of their temples. The Cholas built on the solid and splendid foundation laid by the Pallavas, who had evolved and established the component parts of the temple like *garbhagraha*, *ardhamandapa*, *vimana*, *sikara*, *mandapa* and *dhavajastambha*. The Cholas built great temples, large in conception, design and execution. Along with the previous components they also built outer *gopuras* in their temples.

The *gopura* is the main gateway of a temple.²⁴ The *gopuras* are lofty towers, which cover the entrances to Indian temples *gopuras* with three, five and seven stories were built even during the period of the Cholas. The Manasara²⁵ is an ancient and authoritative text on *silpa sastra*. This work conceives of and describes five kinds of *gopuras* adorning the main gateways in the concentric walls of enclosure. Generally various forms of Siva, which reflect the puranic episodes are found on the *gopuras*. Besides, the images of Lord Murukan was also installed and worshipped as a *gopura* deity. For example a Gajavahana form is found in the single storied outer *gopura* of the Nilakanthesvarar temple at Laddigam. Further the image of Tarakari is seen in the inner side of the lower tier niche on the western *gopura* of Nataraja temple at Chidambaram.²⁶ The above mentioned two earliest examples are helpful to find the date of the evolution and the installation of the images of Lord Murukan on the *gopuras*.

The *gopura* at Laddigam assigned to the period of Kulottunga I in the later part of his reign probably eleventh century A.D. From this it is clear that the worship of Lord Murukan as a *gopura* deity appeared for the first time in the Tamil Country during the eleventh century A.D. The western *gopura* at Chidambaram assigned to the period of Vikrama Chola.²⁷ The fine tradition in temple building established by the Pallavas was carried to greater heights by the Cholas. For instance the Avani Kandarpa Isvara Griham at Kilaiyur has the original early Chola *gopura*. Therefore the evolution of early *gopuras* in Tamil Country is an entirely independent development of the later years, at the time of Kulottunga-I. It reveals the practice of worshipping the images of God on the *gopuras* which appeared in the eleventh century A.D.

The installation of Murukan images- on the outer *gopuras* leads to an interesting culmination. Maturity of experience and high degree of excellence and perfection were reached in the great temple of Thanjavur and the temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, The image which occupied, the early *gopuras* were those of Lord Siva and Puranic episodes. The Saivites in order to respect the relationship of Lord Murukan as a son of Siva installed the images of Lord Murukan on the *gopuras* along with that of Lord Siva. Apart from this trend the Cholas in their architecture erected massive *gopuras*. Under these circumstances the cult of Lord Murukan paved the way for the installation of His images in the outer *gopuras*.

Methodology:

By employing both primary and secondary sources this paper has been attempted. Inscriptional, Architectural and Sculptural art are the major and authentic source materials for writing this paper and it is supplemented by contemporary literary evidences. The methodology adopted in this study is descriptive and analytical.

Conclusion:

The foregoing study reveals that the period of the Cholas, extending over four centuries (A.D. 850 to A.D. 1250), witnessed the steady growth and the flowering of the Murukan cult in Tamil Country. The structural temples of Lord Murukan speak of the importance and the glory of Murukan cult in Tamilaham. The reason for the further progress and zenith of Murukan cult is due to the soul-stirring hymns of the Saivite Saints, which were set to mellifluous music and which served as inspiration for the carving of the various forms of Lord Murukan in stone and metal. The hymns not only alluded to the myth relating to the various forms but also adopted the Sanskrit epithets like Shanmuga, Subrahmanya and Senapathi. It marked the encouragement given to Sanskrit tradition and Brahmanical deities, when it was well advanced. An examination of the allusion to the Puranic episodes of Skanda-Karttikeya conclusively prove that the works made ample use of the Sanskrit epithets and incorporated ideas from great master pieces like Ramayana, Mahabharatha, Kumarasambhava and Skandapurana.

The Cholas were ardent Saivites and great admirers of Lord Murukan. Hence they not only installed various iconographical representations of the Lord but also erected structural stone temples of Lord Murukan for His primal worship for the first time in Tamil Country. The worship of Lord Murukan falls under four categories. To begin with the images of Lord Murukan were installed in one of the sub- shrines of the Siva temple as a *parivara* deity. In due course the images of the Lord Murukan were installed in the *devakostha* niche of their Siva temples as a *vimana* deity.

The Balasubrahmanya temple at Kannanur and Subrahmanya Swami temple at Uttiramerur were the earliest structural temples which were built with stone blocks from the base to the finial for primal worship of Lord Murukan, when the cult attained its zenith. The images of Murukan were also installed in the niches of the outer *gopuras* by the later Chola monarchs as a *gopura* deity.

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