Renowned Chidambaram Temple Entering Final Phases of Renovation
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Comprehensive 10-Year Project Transforms Most Sacred of South Indian Sanctuaries

Seven years into a massive renovation project that will reach from its outer walls and gopurams to the innermost sanctum of Lord Siva Nataraja, the Chidambaram Temple is regaining an outer splendor nearly equaling and beauty of its fathomless spirituality. Gradually, as the teams of workers complete extensive structural and surface work on one section and then another of the enormous, 40-acre temple, new life and luster is bursting forth, giving its 1,200-year-old architecture back its pristine glory.

This 20th-century round of repair and renovation work began in 1975 with a small army of historical-technical supervisors, stapathis, masonary and plaster artisans, foremen and construction workers setting up camp in Chidambaram's precincts. Their Herculean, rebuild-engineer-plaster-and-paint assault includes: repairing and reworking the 15-foot-high, nearly one-mile-long outer wall of the temple; very extensive work on the four main gopurams, including restoring literally thousands of individual figures; refurbishing several temple mandapams; completely rejuvenating the three temples to Shakti, Muruga and Ganesha, which are themselves large temples by most standards; reworking the prakaram mathils, tirumaligaipathis and other artistic structures; building comfortable priest facilities; cleaning the hundreds of marble and granite pillars; polishing the solid gold tiles of inner sanctum roof; building a brand new 200-yard-long pavilion in front of the Thousand-Pillared Hall, for devotees to sit under to watch artistic performances; building a pavilion around the sacred Kondrai tree near the East gopuram; recobbling the outer courtyards of the temple; making extensive repairs on the temple tank; carving 108 small, granite Nandi bulls for the top of the outer wall to replace the decayed plaster ones make 400 years ago; installing a foot-washing facility for pilgrims near the main temple entrance and installing lighting throughout the temple! This stupendous project is guided by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department's "Master Plan" - per a resolution adopted by the General Body of the Podu Dikshitars.

Although Chidambaram Temple's origins are obscured, it is known to have existed in a semblance of its present form for at least twelve centuries and predates this phase as a miniature temple by many centuries more. Including extensive additions, Chidambaram has undergone renovation work on numerous occasions, each renovation reflecting the current materials and artistic styles established for that period. G. Vagheesam Pillai, Secretary of the Chidambaram Renovation Committee, says the last repair and renovation project occurred some 400 years ago.

The Chidambaram renovation project is all the more remarkable, for its subject is a living, working temple. Indeed, it is pulsing with spiritual power. Chidambaram, though ancient, is by no means feebled by its age. To most Saivites, it is the most sacred of all Saivite temples. To renovate and revitalize "Sacred Thillai" is for Saivites the world over truly wonderful and extraordinary.

In the late 1960's an international team of some 100 of the world's best engineers spent millions of dollars and the good part of a year in slicing up and moving one of Egypt's cyclopean Pharaonic busts to escape the inundation of the Nile. It will be admired, appreciated aesthetically, but because the culture and religion that gave it life are gone it will not carry the living value it formerly radiated. The once staggeringly opulent city of medieval Vijayanagar (in Karnataka State) is being rebuilt on a diminished scale out of its own rubble. No one will live there, but a visitor can momentarily relive its past. The renovation project at Chidambaram is different. Here the Saivite culture still prevails, and the worship has never waned.

The "Master Plan" calls for 4.5 million rupees (about U.S.$450,000) to be pumped into the project, all of which needs to be raised through private charitable sources, as Chidambaram has no fund-raising property of its own. Remarkably, the original budget schedule of the project has held its own against inflation, although the final 'real' cost won't be known until the project is complete - estimated by Vagheesam Pillai to be in late 1984 or early 1985. To date, approximately 3.2 million rupees have been raised and spent. Simple arithmetic shows that well over a million more rupees are needed to finish the project. In observing the progress of the fund-raising, R. Ramalingam, Asst. Secretary of the Renovation Committee, said, "Raising the funds for the project has at times been difficult. In the past, the rajas (kings) would subsidize and be directly involved with the temple's renovation. Today we have to rely solely on contributions from private organizations, other temples and individuals interested in the welfare of the temple." After focusing their fund-raising activities in India over the past years, the Renovation Committee is looking towards Saivites in other parts of the world to take up the financial slack

of the project. (For those who want to make the contribution towards Chidamabram's renovation, we have given the appropriate address at the end of this article.)

The overall strategy of the renovation is to "work from the perimeters of the temple in," says M. Chinnadurai, one of the stapathis connected with the work. Looking down on Chidamabaram from a birds-eye view reveals its ground design of four spacious courts, each with its own Rajagopuram facing one of the cardinal directions. Starting with the 5,200-foot length of the surrounding rectangular outer wall, an the four towering Rajagopurams placed midpoint in each of the wall's four sides, the repair teams have spent much of the past seven years structure that had caved in. Whole sections of the wall had crumbled down leaving jagged and gaping holes. Clumps of trees had taken root and were growing right on the walls, causing even more structural damage to the surrounding sections. Vagheesam Pillai notes, "Both the inner and outer faces of the surrounding wall are receiving very extensive repairs, rebuilding; and its ornamentation will be freshly painted, giving it a brand new look while preserving the original style of construction.

Probably the most time consuming phase of the renovation work is the massive (over 7 stories) and intricately detailed gopurams, each of which takes about years to complete rejuvenate. Due to centuries of exposure to extreme weather gradients, whole tiers of the Rajagopuram's sculptured figures had begun to disintegrate. Faces, arms, hands, legs and symbolic accouterments of the inner-being figures had eroded away, exposing at many places the underlying brick of the main superstructure.

Mr. Pichiuyer, one of the main technical supervisors, explained: "What we are working with in the gopurams is a combination of period engineering, i.e., late Chola, Pandya, even Vijayanagar, and a complete resculpturing and painting of the plaster figures ornamenting the gopurams. The West, East and South gopurams are all 13th-century architecture and the North gopuram was erected by the Vijayanagar king, Krishnadevaraya, in the 16th century." From a fascinating tour enjoyed by the writer and one swami from the Church, which included climbing up inside the palm-thatch covering surrounding the scaffolding at the base of the West gopuram, it was seen that the partially hollow, inner structure of the gopurams is built with monolithic beams of hard wood. "One of the greatest challenges of the project," says Pichiuyer, "is to reinforce these beams, but at the same time we don't want to cover up or mar the inner walls of the gateway where 700-year-old carvings of the Natyasastra text (a treatise dealing with Lord Nataraja's dance) appear in early Grantha script."

As of spring of 1982, the North, East and South gopurams had been finished, and the West gopuram was in its final stage of resculpturing. Striking a happy balance between the new-look enthusiasts and the proponents of preserving the pure ancientness of the temple's stone sculpture, the gopuram upper tiers flash in the sun with a medley of colors, while the stately bases retain the softened, natural hues of the their original granite and sandstone.

Technical supervisor, Mr. Pichiuyer, says that after the gopurams are finished, a team of workers will start on the 100-pillared mandapam next to the Savaging tank. Other crews are continuing on the outer walls, but the momentum of activity will over the next two years gradually move in towards the breathtaking gold-scaled roof of the sanctum sanctorum. The final project, explains Mr. V. Pillai, will be to polish the 18,000 gold tiles of the sanctum's roof.

Throughout the centuries of existence, "Holy Thillai" has never diminished in spiritual power or in the clocklike regularity and highly effective performance of its pujas by its venerable conclave of dikshitars. Once numbered at 3,000 families, how dwindled to 300, their diurnal invocations of the Deity serve as the lungs of the temple's shakti-breath, a power recently described by the famous bhajanist, Sri Pithukuli Murugadas, as "a tremendous energy that is broadcast from Thillai like a high-powered radio tower." The living presence of God Siva is infused in Chidambaram's soil and granite. Twice a year, hundreds of thousands of Saivites pour into the town of Chidambaram to worship Lord Siva Nataraja (the central Deity) during the January and June festivals. Recently, in late January of this year, one of the temple's minor shrines held its post-renovation kumbhabishekam attracting around 50,000. For most devout Saivites, who believe that the universe is an intelligent, living entity; and not just inert, lifeless matter, Chidambaram Temple plays an extremely vital part in the scheme of things. They believe that the heartbeat of the universe is intimately connected to the pujas performed at this sacred sanctuary.

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