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Neelamegam

Stone Craftsman of Old

The stalagmite-thin man standing on his verandah talks to us in Tamil. He is one of those old-world artisans who looks like a castaway from the medieval era stranded in our century. We're in one of the most famed towns in India - Mahabalipuram, on the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu. It is an epicenter of stonework - temple design, icon and structural sculpture - several thousand years old. Neelamegam Stapathi, 70, is talking to a man translating for our HINDUISM TODAY profile. Animated, self-effacing, yet fiercely proud of his tradition, he looks like he chiselled his own gaunt face out of granite. He is saying that granite is the final medium a stonework apprentice learns. "First you work soap stone. Then a harder green stone. Then the demanding granite." Stapathi is a guild title of sorts, signifying a master among the caste clan hereditarily responsible for temple design and construction. But Stapathi is not really a hereditary title. It is earned.

Neelamegam tells us, "It takes at least ten years of daily experience in designing, dressing and sculpting the stone before one is really a Stapathi." That is after a decade or more of apprenticeship, learning the scriptures that govern temple and icon design, learning how to choose the right stone, sharpen tools. Sketch to perfection the outlines of a panoply of deities according to strict iconographic rules, and finally wielding the chisels that turn a block of granite into an ornate temple cornice or a three-dimensional image of Siva. These stapathis are gods of the stone gods. In 1984 and '85 Neelamegam received a national master craftsman award.

Neelamegam's wife and daughter are cooking in the back of the house. We are introduced to his chief student, Subramaniyam Stapathi. He is 29, angular and chatty. But he is not really yet a Stapathi. Neelamegam says he will be in the future. Subramaniyam is the brother of the sister who married Neelamegam's son. Normally this son would be heir to Neelamegam's skills, but he died and Subramaniyam - member of the Stapathi caste - stepped into the void.

Subramaniyam is flipping through his sketch book of finely executed deities. They are roundly symmetrical. Such sketches are guides for the rock.

The sketches are from his four-years of school at a government-training College for temple designers and craftsman. There were fifty in his class. And herein lies the difference between old-world Neelamegam and new-world Subramaniyam. Neelamegam never attended school - any school, academic or technical. He was saturated in the temple arts by his father and uncles, spending long night time hours by kerosene lantern learning Sanskrit and Grantha to read the shastras that he now has completely memorized. But the technical skills and the metaphysics of iconography came directly from his father. It is, or was, an oral tradition.

Now there are colleges. Not that Neelamegam is against schools - he was a chief instructor at the best one for twenty years. But he sees a deterioration in the approach and attitude among the new breed. He laments, "They smoke while they work and talk of things that should not be talked about while creating a deity." He says a candidate for these arts should have inner purity and dedication. He is also saddened by the commercialization that has crept into the Mahabalipuram works. Earlier today we saw a totem-pole-like granite pillar - a radical design - being prepared for West Germany. The knicky-knack carvings offered to tourists are of poor quality. Neelamegam's hands go up in exasperation at the mention of this.

Eight years ago we were with Neelamegam when he was creating his greatest challenge - a 10-foot-long, 16-ton Nandi bull. It was the largest to be sculpted in two centuries in India. Its destination was the Siva Nataraja Temple of Saiva Siddhanta Church in Hawaii, USA. Neelamegam explains it was difficult because the proportions were so hard to keep symmetrical as the bull was rolled over from side to side. At that time his crew of workers were sculpting on 8-hour shifts day and night - he coming in on each shift to set up the work. Today he is semi-retired - a small shop adjoins his house.

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