

## WOODEN VAHANAS OF THE TIRUVANAICKA TEMPLE

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### ABSTRACT –

Wood is one of the oldest materials known to icon making. Wood being available in plenty, easily procurable and fashionable in to required shapes must have facilitated human beings to make abundant use of wood. Even now the Vedic Spoons, used for ritual pouring of clarified butter on sacrificial occasions, continue to be made of wood. Wooden objects have been reported from the earliest levels of civilization. But woods being a perishable material, objects made of it do not last for a long time. There are references to wood carved objects of worship in Chola inscription and of the subsequent periods. Wood workers were known as Rathakaras are noted in inscriptions.

**Keywords:** Kalpavrksha Vahana, Airavata Vahana, Kamadhenu Vahana.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wood is one of the oldest materials known to icon making. Wood being available in plenty, easily procurable and fashionable in to required shapes must have facilitated human beings to make abundant use of wood. Even now the Vedic Spoons, used for ritual pouring of clarified butter on sacrificial occasions, continue to be made of wood. Wooden objects have been reported from the earliest levels of civilization. But woods being a perishable material, objects made of it do not last for a long time. There are references to wood carved objects of worship in Chola inscription and of the subsequent periods. Wood workers were known as rathakaras are noted in inscriptions.

Each and every Hindu temple in Tamilnadu, irrespective of its sectarian lineage, where Saiva or Vaisnava or Sakta or Ganapatya or Kaumara (Murgan), possess a number of wood carved Vahanas (vehicle) for festival procession in annual and periodical festivals. Scholars working on South Indian temples have paid the least possible attention to the wooden monuments. Earlier Prof. K.K. Pillay and Prof. K.V.Raman have written about the wooden vehicles in the respective temples studied by them. Subsequently Dr George Michell (London) wrote a book on the Hindu Chariots and also published a special volume of the *Marg*, dedicated to the wooden Vahanas (vehicles) and their uses. Following the earlier authorities in the field, the present thesis presents a complete picture of the wooden vahanas (vehicles) found in the Tiruvanaikka Temple at Tiruvanaikka. There are not less than eleven vahanas in the temple. They are the following:

***Kalpavrksha*** - "The wish-fulfilling Tree"

***Airavata*** - "White elephant", mount of ***Indra*** -

***Kamadhenu*** - "Wish-fulfilling Cow"

***Simha*** - Lion:

***Asva*** - "horse"

***Nandi*** - "Siva's mount"

***Ravanaesvara*** - "demon king of Lanka"

***Bhuta*** - "dwarf goblin"

***Hamsa*** - "Swan"

***Mayil or Mayura*** - "Peacock"

*Musika or Perucali* - 'bandicoot'

All these vehicles of the gods are mounted with the Utsavaberas, Processional images, during annual and periodical festivals and taken around the temple.

Though these Vahanas (vehicles) are meant for Siva and Devi, few are used exclusively for Ganapati and Murugan. They are Musika and Mayura. These two are not meant for these gods, including Siva and Devi.

## 2. KALPAVRKSA VAHANA

Kalpa means an aeon and vrksa a Tree. The denotation is that it is an endless tree and given whatever one wants. It stands for prosperity and eternity. The Vahana (vehicle) is the shape of a tree. It has a trunk, mounted on a stool and the branches of a tree. The branches are attached with woodcut leaves. Above a pedestal is placed in which the images of the gods and goddesses will be placed during processions. Symbolically the Kalpavrks offers prosperity, plenty, progeny and happiness to the devotees.

Apart from the Kalpavrksa, the Hindus also had the knowledge of a celestial tree, called Parijata. It was famous for its flowers and was obtained when "The Ocean of Milk" was planted in the garden of Indra and belonged to his wife, Indrani. It was a coveted possession. Krishna to have defeated Indra and took the Parijata and gave it to his beloved Satyabhama.

## 3. AIRAVATA VAHANA

Airavata is the four-tusked fine white elephant of Indra. It is his mount. It was also obtained while the Ocean was churned and went to Indra's Possession. Airavata takes origin from the word Iravat, meaning "Produced from water" Prominently in mythologies. It is said to have been cursed by sage Durvasa and become black and lunatic. By the grace of Siva he got back his original colour and returned normalcy. There is a chapter in the Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam of the Madurai Minakshi temple, Which talks about the curse of Durvasa and Airavata's sad Plight. The curse having been annulled by Siva, he erected the temple at Madurai first and offered Pujas.

Airavata is also one among the Guardians of the directions. In Hindu mythology the eight directions are guarded by Indra – east, Agni (God of Fire)- South- East, Yama North –West, Surya (God of Sun) - South-West, Varuna(God of Rain)-West, Vayu-North – East, Kubera-North and Somanorth-East. Surya could be replaced for Nirrti and Isana for Soma. Each of the Guardians of the directions have an elephant is Airavata, Agni's Pundariks, Yaman's Vamana , Surya or Nirrti's Kumuda, Varuna's Arjuna, Vayu's Puspadanta, Kunera's Sarvabhauma and Soma or Isana's Supratika.

The Airavata is iconographically a Zoomorphic elephant. He is fitted with four tusks and broad winnowing ears. In the Tiruvanaikka temple it is a majestic piece of work, having its head lifted up. The eyes are prominently cared; and the proboscis hangs up to the ground level. He has four big and short legs. Bells are tied to the neck and the entire body of the animal. He also wears anklets. Upon the back a pedestal is carved in which the processional images will be placed at the time of procession.

#### 4. KAMADHENU VAHANA

Kamadhenu was the all- giving and wish- fulfilling cow. When the ocean of Milk was churned it produced a celestial cow, named Surabhi. Surabhi's another name is Kamadhenu. Kamadhenu a daughter by name Nadnini. She grants desires. She belonged to sage Vasistha. When Vasistha had an encounter with the ksatriya, Visvamitra, she produced a huge army to defeat Visvamitra.

Kamadhenu as a vahana appears in the Hindu temples. However, in Hindu iconography as such is not a popular motif. She is presented in the form of a Zoomorphic cow full breast. The teats are prominent as they are supposed to pour the milk of abundance. Usually she is fitted with the face of a girl. In the Tillaisthanam temple she has a human face and is decorated with a number of necklaces. The tail is shown like that of peacock. Four strong legs of the animal are decorated with floral motifs. The daughter of Kamadhenu who is a baby is shown in the illustration who is being fed by the mother.

## 5. SIMHA VAHANA

The lion is the vehicle of Devi according to the Devimahatmya, a literature which sings the glory of Devi when she undertook an expedition to slaughter the buffalo-demon, Mahisasura. In the aspect she is known as Mahisasuranmardini. When Devi went to the field to Kill Mahisasura and his allies she was seated upon her simhavahana and marched. The lion also fought with the demon and caused his fall. In iconographical illustrations Devi is found seated upon the lion she is called Simhavahini. Few such images could be found in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram.

The lion vehicle in temple is quite common. She is found more in the temples dedicated to Devi. The lion is usually shown in the Zoomorphic form of a lion. The Tillaisthanam images have a lion vehicle whose face is very stern bulging eyes and lolling tongue. The tail of the beast is erect. The lion is painted in green and red.

## 6. ASVA VAHANA

The Horse is the vehicle of few Vedic gods. In fact, the horse was know to the Indians only with the advent of the Aryans. They being nomads of the Central Asian steppes are said to have launched a war with the Indus people with the swift moving horses and caused their fall. Among the ruins of the Indus valley no bone of the horse or its depiction in the Indus Valley people, supposed to be Dravidians. Recently they have discovered a bone of the horse and so some scholars contend that the Indus people know the horse. The point is disputed. Having come to India the horse played a major part in courtly rituals. It formed an important part of the Indian army, known as *Caturanga* “four divisions”, which were ratha – Gaja- Thuraga-Padadi. Of the four, the horse was one, the others being chariot, elephant and infantry. Emperors willing to proclaim their supremacy conducted a sacrifice called asvamedha. In this the horse played an important role and at the fag end of the ceremony the horse was cut and thrown into the sacrificial pit.

Thus the horse with the coming of the Aryans played an important in the Indian day-to-day life. It was both a domestic animal and used in warfare also. Nobility in those times for

conveyance it was fitted to chariots. It was a prized possession in those times. So, the horse came to be associated with the temple also. The horse Vahana is usually a zoomorphic horse. Fully caparisoned the horse is decorated with a number of ornaments. In the Tillaisthanam temple it is found in galloping pose.

## 7. NANDI VAHANA

Nandi is the vehicle of Siva. He is called Nandikesvara and Adhikara- Nandi in Tamil tradition. According to the Vayu Purana he is the son of Kasyapa and Surabhi. He milk is white in colour and the chief of the attendants of Siva. He is the guardian of all quadrupets. He is also called *Salankayana*. He is also called Tandava- Tilaka because he was an expert in dance and music. A literature called *Abhinayadarpana* is attributed to him. Usually images of Zooporphic Nandi are stationed near the Dvajasthamba. There are separate Mandapas for Nandi 18 One such example may be found in the Rajarajesvaran at Tanjore. It was established during the Nayaka period. Nandi is usually represented in two forms; 1) Zoomorphic, 2) With a human body and full face.

In Tillaisthanam temple, Nandi is in the second mode. He is seen in alidhasana mode with the left leg placed forward and the right bent at the knee and pulled backward. The hands are raised up to the chest. The face is that of a bull. He is fitted with horns and short makuta. Nandi wears various orbaments such as kankanas, Keyuras, anklets and so on.

## 8. RAVANESVARA VAHANA

He was the demon king of Lanka who was an ardent devotee. If Siva. He tried to pluck the Himalayas, the adode of Siva, and wanted to replant it in Lanka. But Siva defeated him and rewarded with the Atmalinga for his devotion.

In Several temples of Siva, Ravanesvara is a vahana. He is ten faced and in Tillaisthanam temple, only five are visible. He is twenty handed bears various emblems in his various hands. He is shown like lifting a hill, which reminds the Kailasa episode.

### 9. BHUTA VAHANA

The attendants of Siva are the Bhutas. They are several hundreds in number. The bhuta is always short and stumpy. The Tillaisthanam Bhatavahana is shown a short and stout figure. He is alidhasana with both hands raised up. He has wide eyes and is decorated with several ornaments. He wears a short loin cloth and the canine teeth come out.

### 10. HAMSA VAHANA

Hamsa is the vahana of Brahma and his feminine counterpart, Brahmi. It figures prominently in Indian literature. If water is mixed with milk, the bird has the capacity to drink the milk alone, leaving away the water. Milk white in colour, the bird is associated with the God of creation in Hindu tradition. The *Hamasavahana* in Tillaisthanam temple is like a peacock. It is painted in yellow, red and blue. From its beak, a foliage-like ornament reaches the ground. Its tail like that of a peacock. The wings are upon the back of the bird, It has long tails and soles.

### 11. MAYIL or MAYURA

The Mayil or Mayura is the vehicle of Murugan- Skanda and his feminine counterpart, Kaumari. Adopted by our country as the national bird, Murugan and Kaumari are the only two deities who take mayura vahana.

### 12. MUSIKA VAHANA

The bandicoot in Indian oconography is the vehicle meant for Ganapati. No other god takes this vehicle. It is presented in the Zoomorphic form of a rat with its head raised up. Its mouth and ears are painted red. The body is blue. He is decorated with a number of ornaments on the neck and ankles.

As a rule the Vahanas are not made of solid wood. Inside they are hallowed and sweve to diminish the weight. Since the vehicle is carried on the shoulders of men, they are expected to be light. In case of bigger ones, these may be placed on carts and taken in procession but pulled by human beings. All the vahanas are recent additions take the emayura vahana. The mayil as a vahana of Murukan is noted in the Sangam literature.

In Tillaisthanam temple, the mayil is a two legged bird. It is in zoomorphic form and painted in green. On the neck he is decorated with a number of necklaces. The wings of the bird are carved on the back of the bird. It is the same kind of tail, which is added to Kamadhenu and Hamsa. This vehicle is used only for Murugan during processions. No other is entitles to travel on this vahana.

### 13. CONCLUSION

South Indian temples have paid the least possible attention to the wooden monuments. Even now the Vedic Spoons, used for ritual pouring of clarified butter on sacrificial occasions, continue to be made of wood. Wooden objects have been reported from the earliest levels of civilization.

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