

Panchalinga Sthala Kritis - Dikshitar's Tribute to Lord Shiva

-K.Vrinda Acharya

Ever since the beginning of time, the five basic elements or panchabhootas - earth, water, fire, air and ether have been worshipped by man. The entire creation is made of these elements. Without the functions of these elements, this world would never exist. The five elements make up the physical body of man, permeate his consciousness and are responsible for his various functions. These in turn activate the five subtle elements (*tanmatras*) of smell, taste, form, touch and sound and the five organs of action (*karmendriyas*).

The five Shiva kshetras situated in South India are sacred centres of pilgrimage of the Hindus. These holy places represent the five primal elements of nature. Lord Shiva himself manifests as these five elements. Ekamreshwara of Kanchipuram represents Prithvi (earth), Jambukeshwara of Tiruvanaikkaval represents Ap (water), Arunachaleshwara of Tiruvannamalai abides as Tejas (fire), Kalahastishwara symbolises Vayu (air) and Nataraja represents the akasha tatva (ether) at Chidambaram.

Muthuswami Dikshitar, the pilgrim composer, visited all the five shrines during his voyages and composed wonderful kritis on each of them, which besides being extremely rich in devotion to Lord Shiva, are awe-inspiring compositions of unsurpassed melody and lyrical beauty. He has also described the temples and the sthala puranams in a capsulated form in these compositions. Of these, Chidambaram (and the presiding deity Nataraja) have been sung of by innumerable composers in hundreds of songs. But, it is noteworthy that most Carnatic music composers have not sung in praise of the other four deities, excepting of course, Muthuswami Dikshitar. This makes Dikshitar's Panchalinga Sthala Kritis very significant.

1. Prithvi Linga

Kshetra - Kanchipuram Kriti – Chintayama kanda Raga - Bhairavi

Kanchipuram in North Tamil Nadu is a great seat of religion, culture and education. It is hailed as "*Nagareshu Kanchi*", the best among cities. The principal deity of Kanchipuram is Kamakshi and the deities of all the shrines in Kanchipuram face her temple. The Linga which is believed to be made of sand by Goddess Parvathi herself is

the prithvi linga – that is the central deity of Ekamreshwara temple here. *Ekamreshwara* means Lord of the solitary mango, which is the sthala vruksha.

Dikshitar was invited to Kanchipuram by a great yogi, Sri Upanishad Brahmam, and stayed with him for a few years studying Vedanta. This was when he composed the beautiful bhairvi kriti '*Chintayama kanda mulakandam*' as a tribute to the prithvi linga.

Special references to earth:

The opening line of the kriti has the word kanda twice (*kanda mulakandam*). '*Kanda*' means root, which grows inside the soil and penetrates the earth. Similarly, the anupallavi has the line '*samrajyaprada*'-bestowing empires. The term *samrajya* or empire is temporal and of the earth. But, when a spiritually evolved person like Dikshitar uses the word *samrajya*, he most probably means *moksha samrajya*, the kingdom of liberation, which is the true kingdom to be gained. Nevertheless, the innate ignorance, the sadhana for its elimination and the consequent liberation i.e., moksha is for inhabitants of the earth. Therefore, Dikshitar's usage of *samrajyaprada* in the kriti dedicated to the earth element is quite appropriate. Later, the Lord is described as the slayer of death (*antaka sudana*). Death again is for the inhabitants of the earth. The last line of the charanam refers to the prithvi linga.

2. Ap Linga

Kshetra – Tiruvanaikkaval

Kriti – Jambupathe

Raga – Yamuna Kalyani

Tiruchirappali or Trichy, as it is called now, is at the geographical centre of the state of Tamilnadu and is a great pilgrim centre. Here is situated the temple dedicated to Lord Jambukeshwara and Goddess Akhilandeswari. A forest of Jambu trees existed near a tank here and Lord Shiva is said to have manifested under one of the trees as a Linga. The sthala vruksha is the jambu tree and hence the name Jambukeshvaram for the place itself. The Puranas say that Goddess Parvati made a linga out of water particles and worshipped it here. Water is always present in the inner shrine of Lord Jambukeshwara even during peak summer testifying to the nature of the element the Lord represents here.

Dikshitar often visited his daughter's house in Trichy. He composed the ap linga kriti '*Jambupathe*' in the raga Yamuna Kalyani. The music world is grateful to Dikshitar for giving unto it such a sublime, soulful work, a work of such exquisite aesthetic beauty that it is impossible not to be moved by it. And the way he has utilised a North Indian raga for a major kriti defies description.

Special references to water:

The pallavi of the kriti asks the Lord to give the devotee the nectar of true bliss (*nijanandamruta bodham*). Amruta or nectar is a fluid. The anupallavi begins with a reference to Brahma, seated on a lotus that is born out of water (*ambujasanadi*). Later, the anupallavi says that the Lord quenches the fires that rage in the heart (*hrudayatapopashamana*), which is an indirect reference to water, for it is only water that can douse fire. The next line says that the deity is the Lord of the sea and of the rivers Ganga, Kaveri, Yamuna. Dikshitar further says that Shiva is the Lord of Goddess Akhilandeswari whose throat is akin to conch. (*kambu kanti akhilandeshwari ramana*). Conch is born out of water. The charana refers to the Lord as *ap linga*, as an ocean of nectar of compassion (*karunasudhasindho*) and as one bearing the Ganga in his locks (*nityamauli vidhruta gangendo*). The raga name itself has an association with rivers. This composition has the maximum number of references to the element in concern among the five and is noted for its alliterative beauty especially in the charanam. The ending words, vibho, prabho, shambho, swayambho, sindho, bandho, bindho, gangendo, etc., testify to Dikshitar's command of the language as well as his poetic genius.

3. Tejo Linga

Kshetra – Tiruvannamalai

Kriti – Arunachalanatham

Raga - Saranga

Arunachala is one of the oldest and most sacred of India's holy places. Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, the Sage of Arunachala, declared it to be the heart of the earth, the spiritual centre of the world. Arunachala is called Tiruvannamalai, the hill which cannot be reached, in Tamil. The Shiva linga here is a manifestation of fire. Linga worship is supposed to have begun here. The temple is one of the largest in India. The pradakshina of circumambulation of the hill is considered the most important form of worship to the Lord.

Muthuswami Dikshitar visited Tiruvannamalai of such glory on his way from Kanchipuram to Tiruvarur. '*Arunachalanatham*' is one of his most important songs and celebrates the Tejolinga.

Special references to fire:

The opening line refers to the Lord as '*Arunachalanatham*'. '*Aruna*' is associated with the light of the morning sun. The anupallavi says that the Lord is like a million suns at the dawn (*tarunadityakoti*). The charanam says the deity is a radiant linga (*tejomayalingam*). It goes on to say that in his effulgent locks (*swapradeepamauli*) he holds Ganga and that his brightness excels that of the sun, the moon and fire (*swaprakashajita somagnipatangam*). Also, among the many meanings of the word

‘*Saranga*’, are two that are relevant to the kriti – camphor (easily inflammable) and light. Interestingly, the letter ‘ra’ refers to agni and there is a lot of usage of ‘ra’ throughout the song.

4. Vayu Linga

Kshetra – Kalahasti

Kriti – Sri Kalahastisha

Raga - Huseni

This is the only panchabhoota kshetra outside Tamil Nadu state. Situated in Andhra Pradesh near Tirupati, Kalahasti is one of the most sacred Shaivite shrines. The vayu linga is housed in a vast temple that abounds in sculptural wealth adjacent to the hill on the banks of the river Swarnamukhi. In the inner sanctum, there is a lamp which keeps flickering signifying the air element.

Dikshitar visited Kalahasti during the time he lived at Manali near Madras and composed ‘*Sri Kalahastisha*’. For this kriti again, Dikshitar has utilized a raga that does not offer much scope. Nevertheless, the genius that he was, Dikshitar has coaxed the maximum melody from Huseni.

Special references to air:

In the pallavi, the Lord is described as a zephyr for those seeking refuge in him (*shritajanavananasameerakara*). The anupallavi further describes the Lord as the life breath of Indra, Brahma and Vishnu (*pakarividhiharipranamayakosha*) and as radiating through the five elements (*anila akasha bhumi salila agni prakasha*).

5. Akasha Linga

Kshetra – Chidambaram Kriti – Ananda Natana prakasham

Raga - Kedara

The confluence of great art, vibrant religion and esoteric philosophy; the meeting point of great artists, poets, sages and the Gods; Chidambaram is the only place on earth that can boast of all this and more. It is one of the very rare shrines where Shiva can be worshipped in human form in the inner sanctum itself and where the moola moorti itself is the utsava moorti too. In all other shrines, Shiva is represented only by the Linga.

The panchaloha idol of Lord Nataraja is a beautifully sculpted piece and is the zenith of art. It reveals the power of the Lord as marvelously as it projects His joyous *Ananda Tandava*. The symmetry of the arms, legs and body, dancing with perfect rhythm, coupled with the expression of joy, confidence, valour, peace, sublimity and infinite compassion on the face, present a picture of the Greatest Artist and the Supreme

Dancer. The Chitsabha which is graced by the dancing Nataraja idol is the inmost sanctum of the temple and the Kanakasabha is a mantapa situated just in front of the Chitsabha.

Dikshitar came to Chidambaram on his way from Tiruvannamalai to Tiruvarur and stayed there for a few days. Of the several kritis he composed here, the most important is the one, which specifically refers to the akasha tatva and describes the esoteric significance of the place and the dancing Lord – '*Ananda Natana prakasham*'.

Special references to Akasha:

The element here is space or ether which signifies Consciousness, which encompasses all other elements and is the most difficult to comprehend due to its formlessness. The composer treats the subject accordingly. The deity here is the Lord of the Cosmic hall (*chitsabhesham*). He is dazzling like a million suns (*bhanukotisankasham*), the sun being a celestial object in space. The Lord is Cosmic Consciousness who grants well-being and salvation (*bhuktimuktiprada daharaakasham*). The charanam begins with two celestials who occupy the Lord's matted locks, the moon which is high up in the sky and Ganga who descended from the heavens (*sheetamshugangadharam*). His whole being is Consciousness (*Chidambaram*). The entire creation emanated from Consciousness or space and space existed before all creation. The Lord is appropriately described so (*vishveshvaram, adyam*). Consciousness is ever present (*aprameyam*) and this pure space is the import of advaitic philosophy (*advaita pratipadyam*). Space stimulates the remaining elements thereby causing creation (*bahutarabhedachodyam*).

Conclusion:

It is the one and only Lord Shiva who manifests as all the five elements in order to emphasise the ultimate truth that he is the Self in all. Different manifestations are only required to cater to the different perceptions of bhaktas. In this way, Dikshitar, a truly enlightened being and a realised soul, brings out the inherent relationship between Advaita philosophy and polytheistic worship. It is beyond doubt that his Panchalinga Sthala kritis underlie the fact that the essence in all is the same and all are but manifestations of the Supreme Being.