

## Research

### Senior Fulbright Research Grant

India

December - April 2001-2002

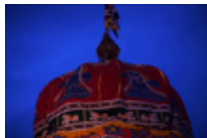
*“and man still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in the recesses of his fervor and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest”*  
Césaire

*“The research project will be to study and record the decorations, costumes, objects and the carvings and construction of the chariots, called rathas or ter, used in religious festivals, as well as the sculptures of the gods and the goddesses and their vehicles called vahanas.”*

from my Fulbright Research Grant application

The research consisted of spending time at various temples specifically in Chidambaram, Kanchipuram and Mylapore, all in Tamil Nadu, and observing the preparation of the chariots, the construction of palanquins and vahanas, the actual processions and the events, which existed on the periphery of the festivals, along with the accompanying "props" and the rice and coloured drawings (kolams) on the streets. These observations took the form of video documentation, photographs and drawings and notes. My background is in architecture, sculpture, and theatre and performance design, and my research approach was from this perspective, with no illusions on comprehending fully the complex nature of the societal and religious structures surrounding the festivals. I also expanded my research to include theatrical performances including puppet performances, traditional theatre productions and contemporary dramas. I also went to other sites including Mamallapuram, various Museums and urban sites.

The first festival I visited was at Chidambaram. On the evening that I arrived on, I walked over to the Sabhanayaka Nataraja temple where I saw five chariots waiting to be decorated and waiting for their time for action. I remember thinking, “Oh good, they are absolutely astonishing and impressive in scale and in away beautifully absurd due to the proportion of the structure in relationship to the base “ It was proof that architectural drawings and photographs can never portray properly scale of architectural and sculptural forms as their essence is about their relationship and interaction with humans.



Chidambaram proved to be an extremely rewarding and interesting time; a mixture of videoing and photographing the construction of the decorations for the chariots and videoing from the inception through to completion five palanquins for the last day of the festival. This was due to the nature of the festival in which the chariot procession was the highlight of the festival on the 9<sup>th</sup> day along with the final day, the 11<sup>th</sup>, in which the palanquins were in action. The five

chariots were located for preparation on the East Car Street adjoining the ratha mandapas and thus the chariot deck. I recorded the process of erecting the top stories made of vertical poles with interlocking crossbeams, the adding of the cloth coverings and the kumbha (top piece), and adding the cylindrical hangings. At the same time as these actions were going on, the lower storey of the main chariot, consisting of elaborately carved panels, was being prepared by wire brushing the surfaces followed by spray painting the surface with a lacquer. The axle of the huge wooden wheels were greased and the “hubs” replaced, the lower panels and wheels were painted afresh, and close to the actual festival banana stalks were added and the swing on which the deity was placed was tied up.



fig ii

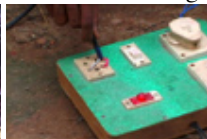


fig iii



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fig vi



fig vii



fig viii

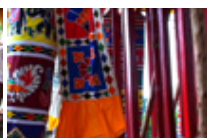


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The last preparation consisted of adding the 12" diameter pulling rope strung through rings and placed around the chariot. During the circumambulatory journey of the chariots around the temple, I was fascinated in the process of maneuvering the vast fixed wheel structure around four 90° turns and the choreography involved in this feat, between the pullers, the brakemen, the wedge controllers, and the general crowd.

The five palanquins were constructed from parts, which had been in storage. The process started by tying together bamboo frames forming three dimensional skeletal structures, which were then covered with paper maché, with repeating three dimensional images added on top of the skinned structure along with rectangular and square mirrored forms. Once these had been added strings of coloured lights were added, and sculptures on the front planes. The whole process took approximately 26 hours, including various wiring problems being ironed out once the generators had appeared to power the lights. This procession occurred on the last day of the festival which happened to land on the night of the 31<sup>st</sup> January so it was a strange mixture of New Years Eve festivities which were quite muted and the procession which was not. The actual deities were illuminated by fluorescent lights and powered by three belching generators, creating thus dense black smoke and an incredible din! I also attended from 2am through to daybreak on the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> day, the holy ablution or Abhishekam, which was a very beautiful "performance", and for me quite astounding due to the amount of substances, milk, flowers, sandalwood paste, honey etc. which were given to the gods and the rapt attention of the devotees.



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fig xv

fig xvi

fig xvii

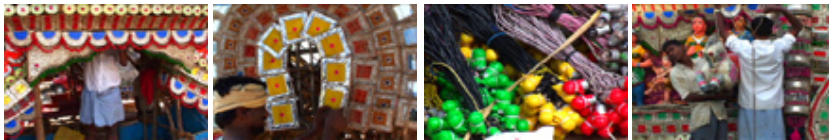


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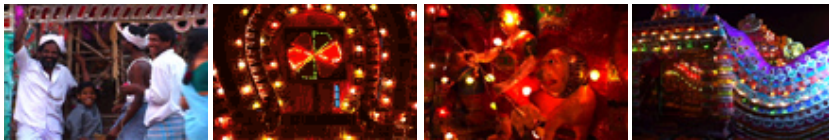


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fig xxv

In Kanchipuram, at the Kamakshi Amman temple, the observations and footage taken were more concerned with the vahanas and their journey around the temple, along with the accompanying elements: two bands, two to four elephants, parasol and banner carriers, firework controllers, and a couple of drummers and policemen. The vahanas were elaborate, and beautifully decorated with the highlight being the parrot dance in which the massive structure along with five or so priests, carried by forty or so bearers on their shoulders, was jogged up and down accompanied by rather "swing" like music. The other vahanas were a cobra, elephant, swan, and two forms of canopies. The decorations for the vahanas included umbrellas with decorative tassels, flower garlands, and silk cloth. The accompanying "players" were an integral part of the journey with the elephants leading the procession followed by banners, a brass band, and a band consisting of musicians playing the thavil (percussion instrument) and the nadaswaram (wind instrument). Additionally, I recorded the preparation of the flower garlands, the pooja koodai, band preparations, the umbrellas – royal emblem of the lord of the temple, preparations of the vahanas, and elephants having their breakfast.



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fig xxviii

fig xxix



fig xxx



fig xxxi

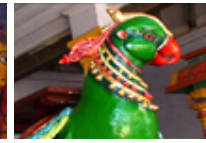


fig xxxii



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fig xxxv



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fig xxxviii



fig xxxix



fig xl



fig xli

In Mylapore, the Bramotsava Festival at the Kapalishvara Temple, the setting was more urban, and included a number of great “props”, the main ones for me were wonderful flying angels who spewed flowers on to the gods by means of pulleys and spring loaded projecting device, and six flaming donut shaped torches. In both cases they were closely related to my own work, and were one of the highlights at that festival. Again flashing lights powered by generators came into play in the Arubathu Moova festival of 63 Saiva saint idols being carried and pulled around the temple. The main chariot in Mylapore for the Panguni festival, was less impressive in scale than that of Chidambaram, but what it lacked in stature and scale it made up for with the tied on paper maché and wood sculptures of various mythical beasts and pulling white stallions. Again, I recorded the preparation of the chariot, the adding of the sculptures and the various processions over the festival. Mylapore’s festival included both chariots and vahanas so was a good compliment to my research.



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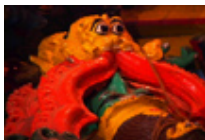


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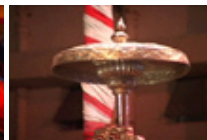


fig xlvii



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fig l



fig li



fig lii

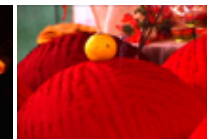


fig liii



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fig lv



fig lvi

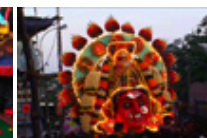


fig lvii



In each of the festivals I was fascinated by the concerted effort to prepare each of the elements, the choreography and direction of the actual procession and the “strike”. Also, I noticed that in Chidambaram the chariots were pulled by both men and women, whilst in Mylapore it was only men for Shiva, women for Parvati and boys for Ganesh. and with the wheeled vahanas it seemed to be mainly men, boys and at times policemen to give a helping hand to the children. In Kanchipuram men were the bearers of the vahanas with women carrying the stands. I also was fascinated with the “props” the umbrellas both cloth and silver ones, the fly whisks, the garlands, the arches with faces of the gana – Kirtimukha on, plates for camphor ash and sandal paste or red oxide, the various forms of kolams from simple to multicoloured, the flower decorations on the street. Each festival had its own tenure and tempo and it was interesting to see three festivals, which were quite different; Chidambaram being more earnest, Kanchipuram very festive and gentle in atmosphere, and Mylapore having the intensity of an urban situation: more effects and endless vendors.

*Where the world is not broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. Let us be a little humble; let us think that the truth may not be entirely with us; let us cooperate with others; let us, even when we do not appreciate what others say, respect their views and ways of life.* Tagore

“...that locates the temple at the intersection of the sacred and the secular realms of experience – not only as a site associated with worship but also as a crucial node in the social, economic and political transactions of traditional India...” Ranjit Hoskote commenting upon *The Hindu Temple* by R. Champakalakshmi

With regards to other specifically related research I visited Mamallapuram where I found the Pancha Pandava Rathas, Shore Temple and the bas relief of Arjuna’s Penance absolutely beautiful in their grandeur and subtlety. I loved the scale of the forms, the vistas through niches and created by columns and the gesture and movement of the figures forming the reliefs. Observing the temples at Mamallapuram was a good compliment to the festivals.

By chance I caught a performance of the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munnetra Sangam when I was first in Kanchipuram and then went back for four performances, which started at 9.30pm and ran through to 6am. The four performances were of companies, who use the Kattaikkuttu style from Tiruppattur, Timojippalli, Siruvanchippattu, Kanchipuram and were performing various parts of Krishna’s life: *The Birth of Krishna*, *The Royal Sacrifice*, *Dice and Disrobing*, *Kuravanch*. Kattaikkuttu is a combination of song, music, dance and improvisational drama. The actors wore elaborate make up and costumes, which were similar in style from each company but markedly different in choice of colour combinations, patterns and materials. The orchestra consisted of two drums, a harmonium, and a mukavinai (a small oboe). The audience in the over night performances were physically and mentally present through the night with only a few kids going to sleep on the ground towards the end. There were a good 400 people sitting on the ground on three sides of the stage and joining in at various parts, as they seemed to know the stories as well as the various political digs. It was a quite special event. Within the traditional repertoire, I also saw *Karlman Natakam* by Chavittunatakam (Parankikalute natakam drama of the Portuguese) from Kerala, which had great fight scenes with interesting choreography and a lot of action. *Chandaini (Regional Epic)* by Chandaini from Chhattisgarh with very good music and movement by the actors, and *Keechakavatham* by Chindu Yakshagana from Andhra Pradesh story from the Mahabharata concerning the Pandavas.

For contemporary dramas I saw three plays directed by women under the title, Voicing Silence Kulavai 2002, *Medea* by theatrebabel directed by Graham McLaren adapted by Liz Lochhead after Euripides and *Dance Like a Man* by Mahesh Dattani directed by Lillete Dubey. In the Voicing Silence Festival, I enjoyed best *Kitchen Katha* directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, which was performed in Punjabi. The sound effects came from jilebi-s sizzling in hot oil, spices being pounded, vegetables being chopped; smells and aromas drifted over the audience and the stage “set” included all the ingredients for cooking, strings of chilies, piles of vegetables, stoves, water carriers etc.. It related to my time sitting around on the streets when videoing or observing. The other pieces were *Ganapati* directed by Veenapani Chawla from Adishakti with four performers on a range of percussion instruments with the predominate being the mizhavu telling the legends of Ganesha and Marthanda. It used minimum language with the stories being told through sounds and gestures. The only absolutely incomprehensible element was the introduction of a French saxophonist playing lead, accompanied by the percussionists. The third was *Manimekalai* by Mangai in Tamil telling the story of Manimekalai turning her back on material wealth, on tradition and societal approval to find her freedom in the precepts of Buddhism and service to humanity, using actresses from the *isai natakam* tradition. I got in contact with Mangai and had a very nice meeting with her and we discovered that the theatre people she knew and worked with in New York City, when there on a Fulbright, are people I have worked with and know. It is as the cliché goes “a very small world”.

The possibility of working or collaborating with Indian artists on a project was impossible given the time scale. I feel a little that I scraped the surface and have good contacts and information for further study and work, and that a number of questions were raised, which are unanswered, and threads started to be followed but unable to be completed due to the time here. I feel that it is a start of a longer adventure and relationship with, both the temple festivals, theatre directors and artists. I am in the beginning process of working on a project to include a workshop and exhibition with Mr Ghosh of the Lalit Kala Akademi in Chennai and in Kolkata with theatre director Vinay Sharma, as well as having a beginning dialogue with Sujatha Goel of Brahaddwa dance/theatre group in Chennai. I made contacts for future work at a number of places in MS University, Baroda, Kolkata, and in Chidambaram, Kanchipuram, and Mylapore, and I am aiming at trying to initiate an exchange program with M.S. University in Baroda, however given the present situation I am not sure how feasible this will be in the foreseeable future.

Some of these contacts arose out of giving a number of talks and presentations at the Government College of Art and Design, the Padatik Dance Centre, the Rabinda Bharati University, Mrs. Khaitan all in Kolkata, M.S. University in Baroda including a day of critiques, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath in Bangalore, Loyolla College and Lalit Kala Akademi in Chennai.

I also attended a very interesting symposium on Indian miniature paintings “Ways of Seeing” presented by Professor B.N. Goswamy looking at Indian painting in particular Indian miniatures from the point of view of the painter his view on time and space and means to tell a narrative which helped my research in regards to my way at looking at the festivals.

*“One, that our approach to painting is often indolent, inadequate: we take too little from works of art, not brining enough energy, **utsaha** in the classical Indian tradition, to the act of viewing.”* Professor Goswamy.

Another high point was meeting dancer and choreographer Chandralekha.

*“ The story of the body can be understood by taking a closer look at the origins and sources of our classical dance forms which have been nourished and nurtured over two millennia. The tradition of physical expression in India is long and unbroken and even a cursory look reveals the integral relationship between principals of work, ritual, performing, eating, and healing practices. Placed side by side, they reveal the tight unity of their dynamic structures and common origins – evident, for example, in the concept of mandala, the common principle of squaring or circularizing the body to ‘hold’ the earth, in all our physical disciplines.”*

Chandralekha

On a more personal level, being in India for 4 months and getting to know, albeit superficially the coffee shop workers, the printers for the booklet and transparencies, the newspaper guy, waiter at restaurant etc. was wonderful, along with the USEFI and US Consulate staff. I got roped into opening Mrs. Krishnamurty’s exhibition (my land lady): ribbon cutting and lighting the lamp although I fluffed this aspect slightly. It was a slightly surreal experience for me and at the same time, I felt quite honored to have been asked. Another personal highlight was going to Eden Gardens in Kolkata, and the MAC Stadium in Chennai to see the one day international cricket matches between India and England. At Eden Gardens I was with 110,000 fanatical and knowledgeable cricket fans, and I will not forget the experience. I also enjoyed checking cricket scores with people on the streets and coffee shops.

By the end of my time in India, I had ended up taking about 32 hours of video footage, 25 rolls of film and 10 8mm films, with on average about 8 hours of footage at each of the festival sites, which I edited down to about 30 minutes from each place sending copies to my various contacts and people I met at the three temple sites and elsewhere.

Sue Rees

April/May 2002

#### Notes on figures

- i. Chidambaram. top of chariot – cloth and kumbha
- ii. Spray painting
- iii. Fixing wiring problems
- iv. Fixing walkway
- v. Fixing top structure
- vi. Painting rings
- vii. Coffee
- viii. Planks from the ratha mandapas to the chariot
- ix. Top structure
- x. Rope pulling
- xi. Drawing kolams
- xii. Chariots in process of being taken apart
- xiii. Taking off cloths
- xiv. Fixing skeletal structure of palanquins
- xv. Adding paper maché
- xvi. Adding figures
- xvii. Adding lights
- xviii. Adding awning
- xix. Adding end decorations
- xx. Lights
- xxi. Adding figures
- xxii. Crew
- xxiii. Flashing lights
- xxiv. Flashing lights
- xxv. Flashing lights
- xxvi. Kanchipuram lighted top
- xxvii. Fixing umbrellas
- xxviii. Fixing umbrellas

- xxix. Fireworks
- xxx. Back of canopy and deity
- xxxi. Snake vahana
- xxxii. Parrot vahana
- xxxiii. Parrot dance
- xxxiv. Bird vahana
- xxxv. Fanning the deity
- xxxvi. Elephant in preparation
- xxxvii. Elephant vahana in procession
- xxxviii. Elephant and policeman
- xxxix. Priest and riend
- xl. Band practice
- xli. Wind band
- xl.ii. Mylapore – 4 chariots waiting to be prepared
- xl.iii. Adding cloth
- xl.iv. Chariot decoration
- xl.v. Adding figures to chariot
- xl.vi. Arch with face of the gana
- xl.vii. Silver umbrella
- xl.viii. Bull vahana
- xl.ix. Petal decoration and kolams
- l. Flying angel and petals
- li. Flying angel and petals
- lii. Burning ring
- liii. Mounds of paste
- liv. Chariot in procession
- lv. Chariot in procession
- lvi. Chariot in procession
- lvii. One of the 63 Shaiva saint idols