



**Full Length Research Article**

**THE CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL IN SRI VARAGUNAPANDEESWARAR TEMPLE AT RADHAPURAM A HISTORICAL STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

India is a subcontinent, noted for numerous festivals in all parts of the country, celebrated every now and then. This study provides evidential information that human relation and religious harmony are maintained, as the people of different castes and communities, religions and languages join hands in the celebration of Chithirai festival, accepting the doctrine Love is God. Celebrating the festival, the people of Radhapuram and those in the surrounding hamlets pay their sense of reverential gratitude to their deities.

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is traditional in every Saivite and Vaishnavite temple to celebrate a festival every year. Among the Saivite temple festivals, the Thiruvavur Car festival and Chidambaram car festival are the traditional and famous ones (1968). Similarly, among the Vaishnavite temple festivals, Sreerangam and Karamadai festival are the famous ones (1982). The festival of Goddess Meenakshi in Madurai is also of worth mentioning one. Yet, it is all the more enjoyable to see the grand Chithirai car festival celebrated every year in Varagunapandeeswarar temple at Radhapuram in Tirunelveli district. The specialty, splendor and principle of this festival are that the car enshrined with Lord Siva is drawn by the men devotees and the car meant for Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani is drawn by the women devotees (1943). This study depicts the car festival with a special reference to its importance, the devotion and dedication of the people (in the surroundings), their religious vow (*viradham*), the constant poojas, rituals and worship, the cultural performance to be held for ten continuous days. The priority given to the woman folk, to draw the Amman Car in the Tirunelveli region, is a unique phenomenon worth recording in the annals of Indian History.

**The meaning of 'festival' (*thiruvizha*)**

India a subcontinent, noted for numerous festivals in all parts of the country, celebrated every now and then. People in Tamil Nadu celebrate the Pongal festival, Diwali, New Year day, etc on the specific days every year. Apart from these festivals, people celebrate ear-boring ceremony, blooming ceremony,

house warming ceremony, birth day celebration, sashtiapta poorthi (60<sup>th</sup> birthday), sadhabishagam (100<sup>th</sup> birthday) and so on at the family level or community level. But the car festival in a temple is celebrated by all the people of all Hindu Communities in a village or town, where the people of surrounding areas also participate, enjoy and worship the deity. So the temple festival or the car festival is called thiruvizha (holy celebration) or festival (1967).

**AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL AT RADHAPURAM**

The Chithirai festival at Radhapuram is being celebrated, since the king's period, with the following objectives:

1. To enable the people of Radhapuram to live in harmony with peace and prosperity.
2. To get the village bestowed and showered with the periodical rain, three a month and thereby to see the fields become fertile.
3. To keep the village free from any ailment or epidemic and to redeem the people from the ailment if any visits there.
4. To get the maids married in the proper age and blessed with children by the grace of Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani.
5. To celebrate the festival in every Chithirai without any lapse or detriment, defect or default. (2011)

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL

The importance of the Chithirai car festival at Radhapuram is referred to in three different aspects.

1. At ten o'clock in the morning on the ninth day of the function, the male devotees of all age groups of all communities – no matter what class or creed, religion or language they belong to – join together and draw the decorated car enshrined with Lord Siva. When the festival car moves, the devotees shout the slogans “*Varagunapandeeswararukku Jai*” and “*Om Namasivaya*” with all their reverence to Lord Siva.
2. In the same way, the female devotees of all age groups from young girls to the aged woman – and of all communities join together and draw the festival car of Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani shouting the slogan devotionally “*Om Sakthi, Para Sakthi*” and thus they offer their vow to the deity (2005).
3. The high light of this festival is that the people of other religions – Christians and Muslims – also quite willingly participate in the festival.

## THE SALIENT FEATURES OF THE FESTIVAL

This festival offer an opportunity for the people of Radhapuram and the hamlets around it – to forget the diversity of their class and creed, caste and community, race and religion, and join together in the celebration in general, and in the car procession in particular. This phenomenon creates human relation, fraternity and religious harmony among the people. The people of Radhapuram send their invitation to their friends and relatives and celebrate the festival in a grand manner. They find no bounds for their rejoicing in the social gathering. It is very much heartening to note that the Christians and Muslims supply food and beverages to the people (who draw the festival car) so as to enable them to assuage their tiredness.

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL

Chithirai is the first month of the Tamil Year; Chithirai festival is very common in all Hindu temples across the state. In the Radhapuram temple, the Chithirai festival commences with the hoisting of sacred banner (*kodi-etram*) on the day of mirukaseerisham and comes to a close on the day of Chithirai (star). It is traditional that Madurai Kallalagar would go into the waters of the Vigai, only after the flag down at Radhapuram temple. It is worth mentioning that Meenakshi Kalyanam is celebrated only on the full moon day in Chithirai.

## THE RITUALS AND POOJAS ON THE DAY PRIOR TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE FESTIVAL

Special poojas and rituals are performed on the day preceding the hoisting of the sacred banner (*kodi etram*) and commencement of the festival, so as to pray the God and Goddess to bless the people to celebrate the festival without any detriment or default.

### a) Deiva Pandeeshwara Pooja

The scared bathing (*abhishekam*) and adoration (*araathanai*) are performed with ostentations (*melathalam*) in the shrine of

Deivapondeeshwara on the south gate of the temple, The priests worship God Deivapondeeshwara and pray to Him to grace the Chithirai festival a grand success without any pitfalls

### b) Isakkiyamman

A similar poojas with worship of ostentations is performed in the shrine of Isakkiyamman (opposite to the south gate) with similar purpose and prayer.

### c) Dharma Sastha

Poorna Pushkala Sametha Dharma Sastha is enshrined in the south west corner of the temple, facing east. Sacred bathing (*abhishekam*) and garland are offered to him, and poojas is performed with ostentations of *panja vadya*.

## INITIATING THE SACRED BANNER (PATTAM) AND INVITING THE ACHARI

The Sacred Banner is prepared by an *achari*. The chairman and the member of the festival committee would go to the *achari* with all the usual offerings such as prasadam on the procession with playing of drums and cymbals. They would honour the *achari* and invite him to the temple to initiate the festival with the hoisting of the sacred banner next day. Thus the *achari* is taken on a procession with the scared banner and the gathering reach the temple.

### Opening of the eyes in the banner

The sacred banner (*pattam*) will get its eyes open in a central place between the shrine of Lord Siva and that of Goddess. Then it will be consecrated with milk, rose water and sandal paste; and then decorated with turmeric and kumkum. Then flowers are sprinkled at the *pattam* and poojas is performed with deepam and dupam and a boom of conch.

## THE FIRST DAY OF THE CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL

### Tying the ceremonial string (*kappu kattuthal*)

The priest performs poojas for Lord Vinayaka under the papal tree in front of the east gate of the temple. Then he collects the soil found around the papal tree and brings it in a tray and keep in the earth (mud) in nine mud basins (*paligais*). The priest sprays nine kinds of cereals (*nava thaniyam*) in the basins and sprinkles water so that the cereals would sprout next day which is called ‘*mulaippari*’. Then the ceremonial strings (*kappu*) will be tied on the wrist of Sivachari Chidambaram. Then the Sivachari Chidambaram ties the ceremonial strings to Lord Vinayaka, God Siva, Goddess Kalyani, the sacred bull (*nandhi*), altar and the flag mast (*thwajasthambam*), and thus the festival gets initiated.

### Holy bathing and special poojas at the thwjasthambam (*kodikambam*)

Poojas are performed for the three Goddesses (Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Parvathi) around the thwjasthambam (*kodikambam*) and a holy bath performed with sesame oil to the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) and then the bath ends with the pouring of sea water. Then special bathing

(*abishegam*) is performed with rice flour, turmeric powder, milk, curd, honey, ghee, *vibuthi* (sacred ashes) and sandal paste. Applying the sandal *tilak* on eight directions, all the deities are decorated with garlands and sprinkled with flowers; and kusa grass (*tharppaipul*) is tied as sacred stings to all the deities. Then the sacred banner is hoisted with all ostentations (*mela thalam*) and shouting slogans 'Varagunapan deeswarakku jai, Om Namasivaya; Sri Nithya Kalyanikku jai, jai jai Kalyani, Jai Shri Kalyani. All the devotees participated with spontaneous interest and devotion to the God and Goddess.

### Consecration (*kumbabishegam*)

The noon-service poojas is performed in the Chithirai Thirunal Mandapam. The procession idols of God Chandrasekara and Goddess Sri Kalyani are offered with a holy bathing (*abishegam*) and noon-service poojas (*uchchikkala pooja*).

### Censer Poojas (*kalasa pooja*)

In relation to the consecration (*kumbabishegam*), the censer pooja is performed for the nine deities in the temple, Nine censers (*kalasangal*) containing civet (*javvathu*), rose water, fragrant properties are adorned with silk cloths, garlands; and offered with flowers, coconuts and bananas. Then the sivacharis perform the *yaga* with sacred fire where the endower makes a vow. The special pooja is performed with adoration for all the nine censers. This is called the '*kalasa pooja*' or *Kumba Pooja*.

### Pani Poojas

The *pani* poojas is a special event meant for honoring the band of orchestra presenting them with raw rice, coconuts, bananas and dhakshina (*fees*). This is performed in the north east corner of the temple on all the ten days during the festival. Then *abishegam* is performed for all the nine procession deities with turmeric powder, milk, curd, panchamirtham, *viboothi*, rose water, tender coconut water, sandal paste, etc. Then they worship Lord Vinayaka near the flag mast (*kodimaram*), and take a procession three times around the outer *prakara* of the temple. After the procession the Virali turmeric (roots/pieces) is pounded the pulverized. The consecration begins with the Kodimaram Vinayaka who is adorned with silk cloth, garland, sandal and kunkum. The sivacharis would be chanting the *mantra* during this offerings.

### Consecration poojas for the main deity Sri Varagunapandeeswarar in the sanctum Santorum

Next to the Kodimara Vinayaka pooja, the pooja and offerings are performed to the main deity (*moolavar*) Varagunapandeeswarar enshrined in the sanctum Santorum, with by giving him body bathing with oil and adorning him with silk cloth, garland and flowers.

### Consecration Poojas for Lord Subramanya, Goddess Gajalaxmi and Sri Nithya Kalyani

The poojas and offerings are performed to Lord Subramanya accompanied by Valli and Devasena, in the similar way performed to Varagunapandeeswarar.

Goddess Gajalaxmi is adorned with garland and flowers. Poojas and offerings are performed with waving of lighted camphor. The *sivacharis* give a holy bathing to Goddess Sri Kalyani in the sanctum sanctorum, adorn her with silk sari, garland and jewels. Then they perform the poojas and offerings including the waving of lighted camphor and the chanting of *veda-mantra* by the *sivacharis*.

### Special Poojas for the procession idols

Special poojas is performed for all the nine procession idols (*urchava moorthis*). The deities are first adorned with silk cloths, garland and offered with *naivedyam*, such as the prasathams are distributed to the devotees and then the temple is closed.

### Evening Poojas

The temple is opened at five in the evening and the usual poojas is performed. At 8.30pm the special poojas and offerings are performed. First, Lord Anukkai Vinayaka is offered with *vada*, *appam* and *sundal*. Then the offered, makes a vow telling his name, birth star, zodiac, clan (*kulam*) and lineage (*koththiram*). Next the poojas and adoration are performed to Lord Sri Varagunapandeeswarar, Lord Subramanya and Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani with all usual offerings.

### Arthasama Poojas and Carnival procession

This poojas is held before midnight. The procession deities are kept on the carnival float (*sapparam*) and adorned with the silk cloths and garlands. The carnival float is decorated with floral festoons and cylindrical festoons hung on all sides. Both Lord Sri Varagunapandeeswarar and Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani are decorated with different kinds of flowers such as rose, jasmine, etc, and offered with sweet pongal and cooked grains. The poojas ends with the waving of lighted camphor. Then the float carriers carry the carnival float (*sapparam*) to the east gate of the temple where the coconuts are shattered and deepam adoration performed. Then the float is kept on wheels and the procession starts. The procession moves along *mada veethi* (mutt street) and *ratha veethi* (car street). When the deity move on procession, the people who are residents along side have a *dharshan* of the God and Goddesses, give their offerings (coconut, bananas, betal nuts, flower, etc) to the deities and worship Lord Sri Varagunapandeeswarar and Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani.

### After the Car Procession

The procession deities are taken back to the temple and a final pooja is performed. Then the priests give away *prasathams* to the float carriers. With this, the first day carnival comes to a close.

### THE DETAILS OF DONOR (KATTALAITHARS)

#### The First Day

It is customary that V.K. Parvathinatha Chettiyar brothers, V.K. Vellaiya Chettiyar of Radhapuram offer their endowment (*kattalai*) on the first day of the festival. The endowment poojas is performed in the name of V.K. Parvathinatha Chettiyar brothers.

### The Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Day Donors

The Yadava Community people of Radhapuram offer their endowment on the second day of the festival. The endowment pooja is performed in the name of the Yadava people of Radhapuram. The Devar Community people of Radhapuram offer their endowment on the third of the festival. The endowment pooja is performed on behalf of the Devar Community people of Radhapuram. It is customary that R.V.P. Chokkalingapillai and his kinsmen in Radhapuram offer their endowment on the fourth day of the festival. The poojas with offerings is performed in the name of R.V.P. Chokkalingapillai and his kinsmen. Madasamy Devar and his kinsmen in Radhapuram pay their endowment on the fifth day of the festival. The endowment poojas with offerings is performed on behalf of the Devar and kinsmen.

### The sixth Day

The landlords, periya pannai and chinna pannai and their kinsmen offer their endowment on the sixth day. The poojas with usual offering is performed on behalf of periya pannai and chinna pannai and their kinsmen.

### The Seventh Day

The special poojas is performed on the seventh day with the endowment offered by C. Kalyanasundaram of Tirunelveli Town and C. Gomathinayagam of Thenkasi.

### The Eighth Day

The Merchants and business firms in Mada Veedhi and Ratha Veedhi collectively pay their endowment for the eighth day of the festival. The endowment poojas is performed on behalf of the businessmen.

### The Ninth Day

The Hindu Saiva Velalar Community people offer their endowment on the ninth day. The endowment poojas is performed in the name of Hindu Saiva Velalar people of Radhapuram.

### The Tenth Day

The Tenth Day endowment Pooja is performed in the name of V. Ramuvel Chettiyar and R. Pannirselvam (Rohini Groups, Chennai), since they offer the endowment on the tenth day of the festival.

### The Eleventh Day

It is customary that the adhidravida Community people of Radhapuram offer their endowment on the eleventh day. The poojas with usual offerings is performed on behalf of the people of adhidravida community.

### THE DESCRIPTION OF THE FESTIVAL

The temple is opened at 5.30 am in the morning. As usual, the abishegam and archanai are performed in the morning. At noon kumbabishegam and adorations (aradhanai) are

performed. At nine in night, the daily kattalai is carried out in the name of the offer (*kuttalaidhar*). The idols of the deities are adorned with silk and garland; and the whole float (*supparam*) is decorated with flowers and electric lights. The deities are taken in procession on different howdahs or floats (*sapparam*) such as Anna vahana, Simha vahana, Rishaba vahana, Garuda vahana, etc, on different days. On the seventh day night Lord Nataraja is installed on the float and decorated with flowers, silk and garland. When taken on procession, a group of devotees sing devotional songs of Thevaram and another group recites Veda mantras. A band of orchestra plays the musical instruments and thus the procession moves along the streets. On the procession the people have a dharshan of Lord Nataraja and enjoy his dance – ‘*thiru thandavam*’. Finally, poojas is performed for Lord Nataraja and Goddess Sivagami. Then the prasatham is distributed to all the devotees.

In the procession Lord Nataraja wears a ferocious look. The devotees, who carried the float on the procession around all the streets, are invited to the archagar’s residence and honored with cash gift of Rs. 11 and coconut, bananas, betel nuts (thambalam), and also a treat with snacks and tea. On the eight day night, around 11 o’clock, Lord Gangalanathar moves round the streets (mada veedhi, ratha veedhi) with the permission of the Goddess; checks up the streets on all directions and sees whether the wheels of the festival car are strong enough and then okays for the car procession of Lord Sri Varagunapandeeswarar to be held on the next day.

### THERADIMADAN KODAIVIZHA

After the Gangalanathar’s procession and inspection around 12 o’clock in the midnight, the security God of the car namely Madan (Theradimadan) is offered with non-veg dishes. This is the traditional phenomenon in the festival (2010).

### NINTH DAY FESTIVAL

The ninth day festival is the very important day of the Chithirai festival. People from all the villages and hamlets around Radhapuram come and attend the festival. The greatness and grandeur of the Chithirai festival is witnessed and enjoyed by all the people. This ninth day special celebrations is a historical fact and it is held every year without fail.

### LORD SRI VARAGUNAPANDEESWARAR CAR PROCESSION

Sri Varagunapandeeswarar accompanied by Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani – both in the adornment of bride and groom – are decorated with silk, garland and flowers. The car is decorated with festoons, flowers and mango leaves. On both the sides in front are put up two plantain saplings. The backdrops bear *nandhideva*’s figures. Turmeric paste is sprinkled on all the wheels; and sandal and *kumkum* are spotted on the wheels and then lemon fruits are placed under the wheels of the car. Then the pooja is performed with *pongal* and *deepa-dhoopam*. After worshipping the Theradi Madum, around 9.00 a.m the festival car enshrined with Lord Varagunapandeeswarar is drawn by the men folk. Drawing the car, the devotees shout the slogans

'Varagunapandeeswararkku jai', 'Om Nama Sivaya', 'Siva Siva' etc. Lord Varagunapandeeswarar car moves gently and slowly.

### The Goddess Car Procession (9 am)

The car is decorated with festoons, mango leaves and plantain saplings. The top of the car is decorated with colorful cloths, floral festoons and garlands. A flag with the figure of Nandhi is seen atop in the Amman's festival car and the banners bearing the words 'Om sakthi' 'Para Sakthi' are added to the decoration. The below pictures given below shows the women folk draw the Amman car and the car moving slowly while the women devotees shout in praise of Goddess, "Om sakthi", 'Parasakthi', 'Kalyani Mathavukku jai', 'jai jai kalyani', 'Jaya sri kalyani' etc (2011).



When the festival cars move on procession, the police are deployed in bundobust.

### The Devotee's awaiting and offerings

The residents (devotees) of *madaveedhi* and Car Street clean and decorate their front yard (*vasal*) with kolam. They await the arrival of the God and Goddess. When the procession

deities come near their front yard, people offer the poojas things such as coconut, bananas, garland, bathi, camphor, etc.

The cars reach their parking place (*theradi*) by 2.pm.

Then *Kumbabishegam* is performed.

The same day by ten in the night musical performance is organised.

### Flag Down – on Tenth Day

On the tenth day night, after the endowment special poojas, the flag down ceremony is to be held. Around eleven in the night, one of the two *Sivacharis* (V. Ramanujam) would appear in the disguise of *Kalabairavar* with the trident in his hand. The other *Sivachari* (V. Narasimhan) would appear in the disguise of *Chandikeshwarar*. These two *sivacharis* are adorned with garland and the vestment (*parivattam*) tied round their head. *Kalabairavar* will have a trident (*soolayutham*) in one hand and a flaming torch in the other hand. *Chandikeshwarar* will have a water jug with a spout (*kandi*) in one hand and a rod or staff with frankincense. Both *Kalabairavar* and *Chandikeshwarar* would move to the east gate of the temple where an archagar would wave and show *dheepa-dhoopam* and thus give thanks to *ashtathikpalakas*, another *sivachari* would offer cooked rice; and sprinkle water in all the eight directions. At the eighth direction north-east (*Eesani* corner) the priest waves flaming camphor. Then it moves to the *Bairava sannathi* with accentations (*melathalam*) through the east gate and ends there.

Then showing *dheepa-dhoopam* to the flag-mast (*kodimaram*) with the boom of conch (*sangu mulakkam*) and trumpeting of the five instruments (*panjavadhya*), the sacred flag is lowered. Immediately after the flag down, coconuts are scattered before *Vinayaka* near the flag-mast (*kodimara vinayaka*). The places of the scattered coconuts are collected by the *archagas* and distributed to the devotees present there; with this, the flag down ceremony comes to an end. Then a special pooja is performed to God *Varagunapandeeswarar* and goddess in the bed chamber (*palliyarai*) (2011).

### THE BENEFITS GAINED BY THE LABOURS OF COTTAGE INDUSTRIES IN CHITHIRAI FESTIVAL

The laborers of different cottage industries from different districts come and erect their tents and stalls to sell their products. Especially on the ninth day and the eleventh day of the festival, there are more than fifty stalls occupying the entire mutt street (*madaveedhi*). In the stalls, play materials (dolls and toys), plastic materials, ice cream, cool drinks, sweets, bangles and ear-ring, cosmetics, balloons are sold. In some stalls, pooja samans such as coconuts, bananas, camphor, incense sticks are sold. Apart from these stalls, there are giant wheels, merry-go-round for the children's entertainment and rejoicing. The gypsies (*narikuravas*) sell the needles, earthen beads and necklace of green beads. Thus the proprietors and labourers of small scale industries and cottage industries sell their products and get benefited; and the individual labourers also gain the benefit, by camping here for the ten days and selling their products.

### CONCLUSION

This study reveals the fact that the Chithirai festival in *Varagunapandeeswarar koil* at *Radhapuram* is a unique one, in the annals of Tamil Nadu History. This study throws light

upon the special phenomena of virali turmeric offerings to Goddess Sri Nithya Kalyani and the women only to draw the procession car enshrined with the idol of Goddess Kalyani. The very purpose and importance of the Chithirai festival is to pray the deities to bless the people of that region with periodical rain (thrice a month) and to protect them from ailments and epidemics. Celebrating the festival, the people of Radhapuram and the hamlets (in the surrounding) pay their sense of reverential gratitude to the deities (1986). This study provides an evidential information that human relation and religious harmony are maintained, as the people of different castes and communities, religions and languages join hands in the celebrations of this festival, accepting the doctrine '*Anbe Sivam*' (Love is God). It is interesting to note that a special poojas is performed for the sacred flag super imposed with the figure of Siva lingam. The festival is celebrated for ten continuous days with specific poojas at specific hours daily commencing with the hoisting of the sacred flag on the first day.

The ninth day of the festival is the most important day as it is marked with the car procession; and hundreds and thousands of people from all the villages around Radhapuram come and enjoy the festival. It is an enormous social get together following the principle *onre kulam oruvane deevan* (1963); people feel that they are blessed with the divine grace. One could verily the co-operation and co-ordination of all the people of different castes and religions, and of different villages in the ninth day celebration. The artistes – dramatists, singers and dancers – perform their cultural programmes, by which the people can have a rejoicing entertainment. The artistes can find an earning and the laborers of cottage industries can also find some profit by selling their products. The people of the nomadic community, the *narikuravas* also have a chance to do their business and gain profit. Above all the Chithirai festival at Radhapuram enables to maintain the traditional Tamil culture, communal integration, religious harmony and traditional sense of hospitality among the people in and around Radhapuram. When the people extend their hospitality to kinsmen and friends in the social get together, the sense of human relation is developed in minds of the people.

This Chithirai festival at Radhapuram has been recorded in the annals of history of the temples in Tamil Nadu. Anyone who goes through the text of this study would definitely be inspired to visit Radhapuram and enjoy the grand festival celebrated in the Varagunapandeeswarar Temple in the month of Chithirai (2000).

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