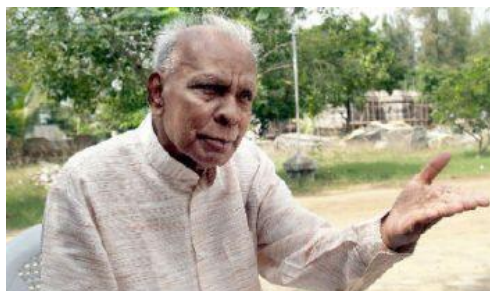


February 20, 2009

## Sculpting a success story



THE ARTIST and his creations: V. Ganapati Sthapati



The Tiruvalluvar statue. .



The chariot at Valluvar Kottam

T.S. SUBRAMANIAM

Sculpture, architecture and Vaastu sastra... these are a few fascinating facets of V. Ganapati Sthapati, recipient of this year's Padma Bhushan.

*Space is everywhere. If this space is confined by a four-walled structure, it becomes a living organism.*

Meeting 81-year old V. Ganapati Sthapati is an interesting experience. He can dazzle you with his scholarship of Tamil, Sanskrit, Vaastu Shilpa sastra, architecture and mathematics. He is a practising sculptor and an architect with a quest for research. Even at this age, his spirit for learning has not dimmed. He is not afraid to speak out his mind either. "Sanskrit and Tamil are one. Technically, they are the same. Only we are fighting over them (about which is superior to the other)," he says and lists out words that are the same in both the languages. For example, 'moolan' in both means source, 'kalam' denotes time and 'gnalam' is world. Ganapati Sthapati was among those chosen this year for Padma Bhushan award. "It is a matter of pride that I have been chosen for the award," he says with humility. "It gives me a sense of satisfaction, for the award is a recognition of our tradition." The tradition that he represents is that of Viswakarmas and the Vaastu science of sculpture and architecture, including temple building. He is a descendant of the long lineage of traditional sculptors and temple architects — Viswakarmas — in Tamil Nadu.

According to him, Brahmarishi Mayan is the progenitor of Vaastu science, and the science of Shilpa sastra and architecture are based on mathematics. While others have merely defined architecture as the science of material space, Mayan has described it as 'the pinnacle of achievement in mathematics.' This mathematics implies the use of a unique measure called 'Space-Time Units.' Ganapati Sthapati himself describes architecture as 'frozen music' in which 'vibrations are important.'

### Subject of study

For 27 years, from 1961 to 1988, he was the principal of Government College of Architecture and Sculpture at Mamallapuram. While there, Ganapati Sthapati raised the status of the art of sculpting "from a mere craft practised in thatched road-side sheds to the four-walled precincts of the college where the students learnt the science and technology of tradition and came out as graduates with a B.Sc. in Temple Architecture."

"Also the age old technical literature on Shilpa and Vaastu (architecture) shastras, which were both in Tamil and Sanskrit, were brought into the curriculum of the institute, thus elevating its academic status." He argues that vastu means energy and vaastu means matter. "Energy contains matter and matter contains energy. This is our Veda and we practise this theory in architecture," he says, and continues, "Space is everywhere. But you cannot see it. It has no form which can be seen with eyes. However, if this space is confined by a four-walled structure, it

becomes a living organism. It can breathe. In doing this, I use orderly measures. These are backed by a mathematical formula... This technology is called Vaastu shastra."

Ganapati Sthapati has designed and built 600 temples in different parts of the world including India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Sri Lanka and Kenya. He was the architect of Sri Swaminatha temple in New Delhi. He built the 133-foot tall statue of Tiruvalluvar at Kanyakumari, the Valluvar Kottam including its massive chariot in stone in Chennai, the administrative block of the Tamil University at Thanjavur and its library building, the Silappathikaram art gallery at Poompuhar, near Thanjavur, and many more.

When M. Karunanidhi became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1996, he specifically commissioned Ganapati Sthapati to build a statue for Tiruvalluvar on the rocky outcrop, surrounded by sea on all sides, at Kanyakumari. The 133-foot tall, free-standing masterpiece in granite is a testimony to the ingenuity of the architectural skill of Ganapati Sthapati.

### Granite masterpiece

"The Tiruvalluvar statue has no foundation at all. It is mounted on a rock. There are 7,500 pieces of granite in the statue. We assembled the statue bit by bit. All pieces are inter-locked. It is a great achievement to interlock 7,500 pieces of granite," he says.

Sceptics asked him whether such a tall statue could stand on a rock, buffeted by winds from the sea on all sides. They also wanted to know whether the statue's neck and head could be integrated into the torso. To them, his reply was, "If the statue does not stand, you can chop off my head. As long as 'alai' (waves in Tamil) and 'malai' (hillock) stand, the 'silai' (the statue) and its 'thalai' (its head) will survive." And survive it did the waves of tsunami in December 2004.

Building the chariot in stone at Valluvar Kottam was another daunting task. (Temple chariots are generally made of timber). This stone chariot has three parts: the lower one in inverted pyramid form, the middle one made of pillars and the top one in pyramid form supported by these pillars. The chariot has wheels made of stones. "Building the chariot in stone was difficult," he says.

After he retired as the principal of the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture, Sthapati devoted his time to research. "I never wasted 20 years of my retired life," he says. "I did research and discovered my roots." He has written more than 40 books including those on Shilpa Sastra in Tamil and 'The Scientific Edifice of Brihadeeswara.' He is currently writing his 41st book and building a temple for Mayan near Mamallapuram.

### Some landmarks

- \* The Tiruvalluvar statue in Kanyakumari — 7,500 pieces of granite are interlocked.
- \* The Valluvar Kottam including its massive chariot in stone, in Chennai
- \* The administrative block and library of the Tamil University at Thanjavur.
- \* The Silappathikaram art gallery at Poompuhar, near Thanjavur.
- \* More than 600 temples across the globe including the famous Sri Swaminatha temple in New Delhi.

[Email the Editor](#)

---