

# Ther

## South Indian Chariots

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## APPROVAL SHEET

This special project report entitled "Ther - South Indian Chariots", by Harish Kumar P is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Design degree in Mobility and Vehicle Design.

Project Guide:

Date:

Place:



## DECLARATION

I declare that this written submission represents my idea in my own words, and where others ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original source. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not falsified, misinterpreted or fabricated any idea/data/facts/sources in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also invoke penal action from the sources from which proper permission has not been taken, or improperly cited.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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Harish Kumar P

Date :



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**Dedicated to all the talented craftsmen who could design vehicles for the divine beings**

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# 1 Introduction

## Abstract

'Ther', the South Indian chariots, also called as temple cars. These vehicles are designed to carry the temple idols by deities around the temple. The temple car is taken out once in a year, that is popularly called as Ther Thiruvizha (temple car festival). Usually belonging to Hindu temples, these have a lot of social impact too. These are made up of materials ranging from wood, stone to more expensive materials like gold and silver. The process of making these also depends upon the place, the practices they follow and the type of craftsmen available in that location.

These huge moving art pieces are made by people who are not from any engineering, design or art

background, but learn from their ancestors who had been making such structures generations after generations. How could they build such a huge and heavy structure which could move through the streets without any mechanical failures, how does it stay steady even when it is turned by people who doesn't know how reliable it is. How the whole Ther is made? And who all are involved in it? Who all are involved in building it? How it get its identity? , and more. The project is about finding out answers for these questions, to look into the future and see how these will be made and how people will perceive these colossal moving structures.

## Evolution

The evolution of these huge art works can be connected with the old Hindu scriptures, where the kings (The gods are portrayed as kings in these scriptures) use their chariots whenever they go out on some journey or war. For example lord Krishna in Mahabharata was riding a chariot during the war. These chariots have got a great significance as they reflect the power of these gods. With those as evidences, the present day Ther is of a similar purpose, to take the god on journey by the people, for the people. This belief has become very strong so that this journey happens every year.

Ther have been evolving through out ages, the materials used, the technique used to propel them

have been keep on changing. But the main theme is kept the same, to depict the god through the vehicle and to maintain the identity of the temple and the ther.

The materials used to make the Ther are usually kept constant, wooden Ther is kept as wooden and gold is maintained as gold. But the type of wood or the quality of the gold might vary every time they construct a new one. This is mainly because of the availability of the material, the funding and the type of labor that is available at that point of time.

The exterior design intent is always kept similar, but the interior structure might change. The interior framework gives

strength and supports the sculpted pieces fixed on the exterior. The techniques and tools used are almost the same which is followed for decades together. The artisans comes from the background which follows these art forms and that's their only source of income too.



## Sthapathis

Sthapathis are architects / craftsmen/idol makers or more, depending on the place and the time. Basically Sthapathis are the architects of the hindu temple architecture. They build all the temples, thers and idols. They are supposed to be from Vishwakarma caste who are basically architects and craftsmen. They used to serve the kings for building all Hindu based structures. They are the head architect or craftsmen who designs the whole structure



and makes the local craftsmen to work for that design. Even god was called as Sthapathi in Rigveda who is called as the architect of the whole universe. All the sthapathi knows the Shilpa Shastras, which is an umbrella text for numerous Hindu texts that explain about manual arts. It has

all the standards for all the hindu iconography, the proportions of Hindu sculptures and the rules and regulations of Hindu Architecture. Which leads us to Vasthu shastra which dictates all the rules of building all Hindu architecture. The Sthapathi must know all the Vasthu Shastra rules before building any structure. He is seen as close to a divine person as he designs how the sculpture of the god should look like in that temple. A huge contribution is done by late V. Ganapathi Stapathi who had been campaigning to restore the tradition in Indian modern society since 1960s.



### Significance

The main purpose of building a Ther is to take the gods representation ( usually sculptures) outside to temple as a voyage as inscribed in the old Hindu texts. Every god has their own way of going on a voyage, hence every Ther is unique depending upon the god and the temple's architecture where the sculpture is taken from. There is another thought for the purpose of a Ther. In olden days, even now in many places, there used to be a very stringent caste discrimination. This discrimination didn't allow the so called lower caste people to enter inside the temple. During the Ther festival, the people who were not allowed inside could worship when the idol goes on a

voyage around the temple. Ther is usually pulled by people who believe that if they do so, their sins will be erased. For pulling the Ther also there used to be stringent rules that who must pull it and who cannot. The festival is called "Ther Tiruvizha" which means chariot festival which usually happens during March and April every year and would last more than 25 days.

# 2 Ther Design

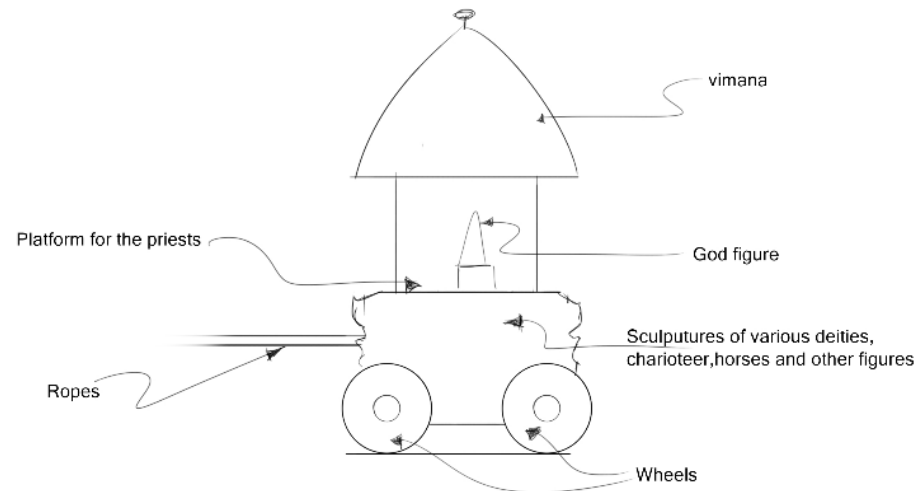
## Science and Architecture

### Anatomy

The anatomy of Ther usually varies with different places. But there are some notable common features which give the identity of a Ther. Since the Ther is derived from chariots, it will have a minimum of four wheels. The wheels will be mounted on a huge wooden structure or other materials based on the type of Ther, where all the sculptures are fixed. The notable feature about Ther is that all the sculptures which are usually deities and horses are kept underneath the god's sculpture. It is exactly opposite to the temple architecture, where the sculptures are always over the Garbhagruha (the place where the god resides). This is the main structure which is going to take

the whole load. The god's figure or sculpture is kept over this part which creates a platform for the priests to stand and do all the necessary pooja. Over the god's figure, there will be a towering structure, more like an umbrella (also called as Vimanam). This structure will not have any

sculptures, but only some cloth or light weight material over a rigid frame. This is usually taller than the rest of the structure, that gives a floating feel while it is moved. This part is highly decorated based on the temple architecture.





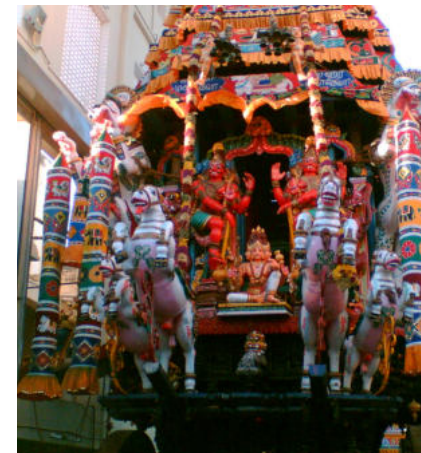
### **Relation to Temple**

Talking about the temples architecture, the Ther is usually related to the temple it is from. The identity of the temple is reflected upon the Ther. For example the Ther from Thiruvavarur Thyagaraja Temple will have similar identity. This is much because of the sthapani who made that temple. He knows how to keep the identity similar to that of the temple. The features like the deities sculptures, the colour scheme, size of the temple, the main god's features are translated into the Ther's design. More of this relation shall be discussed in the case example.



### Location of typical elements

There are some typical elements and figures which is common in most of the Ther's. The Ther is a vehicle for the god, so these vehicles are usually pulled by horses which is clear from the old hindu texts. These horses are usually facing th direction of travel, that is the horses face the direction in which the Ther is pulled. Elephant figures are usually seen on the rear ends. Few Makara's ( half terrestrial, half aquatic mythological creatures) are also present in most of the Ther's. Every Ther will have dancing figures and figures of deities below the gods sculpture.



### Symbolisms

The Ther itself symbolizes the unstoppable power. That is one of the reason, it is built in such a massive scale. There are many symbolisms in a Ther similar to the temple. Many people pull the Ther, which symbolizes that they are directly bearing the god on their own shoulders as an offering to the almighty. The figures on the Ther also has some symbolisms. The horses symbolize that the chariot is always moving. The dancing deities give an expression of celebration and job. The elephants and makaras on the Ther also acts as bearers and protectors. The huge Vimana also suggests that the vehicle can fly which is described in the hindu Mythology.



## Maintenance & restoration

The maintenance of Ther is usually done by the community which takes care of the temple. People who contribute to the welfare of the temple take care of the Ther too. In cases like Thiruvavur temple, the state government and other private organizations contribute to the maintenance restoration as these are considered as the states identity. These Ther's are restored every year before the temple car festival begins. Restoration work is again supervised by the sthapani who built it or assistant of that sthapani. Restoration is done by dismantling the whole structure and replacing and damaged and old components by new ones. The sculptures are restored by treating them with varnish or anti degrading chemicals so that they can be reused again. If any of the sculpture is broken, then they have to make a new one which will fit in the old space. If the Ther becomes too old, then they have to replace most of the components with new materials. If the previous material is not available, then they have to go for alternate materials. With advancement in new technologies and manufacturing process, the components are replaced with unconventional materials. Typical example are the wheel axles and the wheels which used to be made out of wood are replaced with steel wheels and axles. But the technique of construction is not varied much throughout the years. The sculptors will make frames out of wood and then fix the sculptures on that frame. Funding for these restorations comes from the government, private organizations and share of the people who have interest in that temple. The funding also involves expenses like fee for the sculptors, materials, setting up shed for working and other miscellaneous expenses.



# 3 Case Study

## In search of Ther

The case study was kicked off by going to Tanjore (Thanjavur) district, which is known for its temple and rich tradition of sculpting. Tanjore Periya Kovil (Tanjore Brihadeeswarar temple) is supposed to be one of the largest temple in India and it turned 1000 years in 2010. This temple was built in just 6 years time by Raja Raja Chola I. Considering this would be a good place to start the research, I reached that place first. From there I went to Mannargudi, then to Thiruvarur and then to Kumbakonam. On the way many interesting conversations happened with the local people. Some of the notable points were : They are proud about the rich tradition they follow, which did

not reach other parts of India. They gave clue about Aazhi Ther (One of the biggest Ther in the world). When I asked what is the purpose of these Ther festivals, they said there are many lower cast people who cannot go inside the temple, so the god comes out every year and goes on a voyage to bless everyone. The caste discrimination used to exist before, but is it still happening?!. Likewise many conversations happened and then got directions from them for the next location. I came to hear more about the sthpathi's from the local people. They said Sthapathi's are well educated people who knows all the rules and rituals to build a temple and god sculptures. They said sthpathi's give life

to a stone when they make the eyes. This is a popular ritual followed in this region. They take full contract of the whole temple, they design the whole temple and the god sculpture too. They charge around 20 lacs for a project. But they didn't reveal how they design, the only thing known is that those people have read all the Vasthu Shastra and the Shilpa Shastra.







## Mannargudi

From Thanjavur the next stop was Mannargudi. I reached this beautiful temple, Rajagopalaswamy Temple. Here the main god was lord Krishna. The place had no sign of Temple car. When I approached inside, I got a great welcome by the temple elephant. Still the Temple car was no where to find. Then after approaching the temple office, I got to know that the Ther is sealed inside a shelter and it will be opened only during the temple car festival begins.

Then I got a chance to see the covered Ther. It was covered in corrugated metal sheets, which used to have thatched roof. The Ther is again sealed by the Sthapathi who made it. Here we can see how much importance

a sthpathi has. The steps on the right of the shed is the place where they mount the gods figure on Ther. They have planned for a temple car even while building the temple itself. It is evident that they want the temple car to be personalized for the temple itself.



## Thiruvavarur

From Mannargudi, the next stop was Thiruvavarur. Having high hopes that i would see a Ther over there, i proceeded to Thiruvavarur. Thiruvavarur has the biggest temple car in Tamil Nadu. It is called as Aazhi Ther ( which means great chariot). It is 96 feet tall and weighs more than 300 tons. When I reached Thiruvavarur, the first thing I noticed was the huge temple pond and the massive temple itself. The massive size of the temple itself gave an hint about the size of its Ther. When i approached near the temple, there were these four huge steel wheels which was more than 6 feet in diameter. They also had hints of breaking mechanism embedded in it.



When I went inside the temple, they were constructing the whole temple car from scratch. They didn't let to click pictures, but got to interact with the sculptors. Around 20 plus sculptors were working on the new frame of the temple car. They had a very high thatched roof setup to work. They were laying layers of long cross bars one over another to gain height. The sculptures were then fitted on that fixed frame. The sculptures were not made from scratch, the old ones were renovated instead. They are sticking on to the previous design, but the materials are new. The Ther was last made in 1920, after that now only they are totally ripping it apart and constructing new frames. They

also said that they tried to propel with electric motors and other aiding mechanisms since the Ther was very heavy.

### Kumbakonam

From Thiruvavur, I went to Kumbakonam. There is this famous temple called Swami Malai temple, which gave contact of a few sthaphis and then got an information that there is another Ther in making at Nagaram village, Pudukkottai district.



### Nagaram Village

Nagaram village is at Pudukkottai district. There they were building a Ther for their Balasubramanian temple. The main go there is lord Murugan. When I approached the local people, they said a school teacher was taking care of the whole project. The picture on the right is the temple.

The Ther was constructed in a thatched hut kind of structure which was around 20 feet tall. The construction site was just near the temple in an open lawn. There were old parts of the previous Ther were lying around, discarded and not disposed. Only two sculptors were working at that time, and they were from the nearby village. It was interesting to note that they were not having any kind of modern tools. The whole process was done with very basic and minimal tools.





If we see closely, the wheels which were discarded are also made from wood. They used a technique to make a wheel out of logs of wood. They made cubiods out of the logs and then stacked one over another to make a disc with some thickness. Over this disc, planks of wood are used to revert it permanently in place. The axel was also used to made of wood. For this year, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited ( BHEL) supplied steel wheels and axles as shown in the pics.









The whole frame of the Nagaram Ther is made out of Iluppai wood (*Madhuca longifolia*). These are the best wood for making sculptures. Almost all the Ther's are done using this wood only. The sculptures which are taken from the previous year Ther is renovated and placed on the wooden frame. The bottom beams are fixed with hooks to pull the Ther. The axle will be removed and replaced with the new steel axles. The Ther grows layer by layer and finally the top vimana part will be made. For making the vimana part, they will remove the thatched roof and start constructing frame for it.

As discussed earlier, the horses were used on the front of the Ther to symbolize it as a chariot and it is moving fast. In this Ther, the front side has two horses with all the deities around it. On the rear elephants are used to show the power of this Ther and it also

symbolizes as guardians of the Ther, just like elephant at the temples. The dancing sculptures express a sense of celebration and joy. In addition to these many makaras are also present to enhance the expression of the Ther.









The above two images show the parts of the previous year's Ther. The craftsmanship is clearly on the left side photo. Illupai wood is really giving a stone kind of feel to the carvings. Its washed out colour is also helping it get the richness and surface definition. On the right its clearly shown how the beams are fixed. The cross beams creates a layer and more layers are added to get more volume. The bottom right images shows the dove tail joints and other simple joints used to make the structure. Basic carpentry rules were followed and made by hand. The carvings are fitted on to the frame using these dove tail joints and it is reverted wherever necessary. The temples language is maintained too. The patterns like paisley or mango patterns are usually used to decorate lord Murugan. That is extensively used to decorate the Ther, thus maintaining the identity. Though it is a small Ther compared to Thiruvavur, the amount of work which goes into it is enormous. Do these craftsmen and sculptors get proper recognition? They make vehicles for the god himself, are these vehicles evolving or all the innovation has been stopped because no longer work for these beautiful masterpieces?



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