CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
Introduction

Out of India's vast artistic heritage the temples of South India present a many faceted interest. They are anchored firmly in India's long history and yet soar upwards to emphasis the limitlessness of human aspirations. Collectively they reflect the pageant of the development of one of man's oldest cultures and individually through the hundreds of sculptures and paintings which adorn their surfaces they depict the struggles, failures and successes of men who made them the centre of their lives. More than that the South Indian temples are to-day as much a part of the life of those who live at their feet as they were when they were built. They continue to be used daily by hundreds of pilgrims and visitors as religious shrines, cultural centres and places of repose and meditation.

Indeed nothing could sum up the essence of the present discussion of Vīhināthaswāmy temple in this study, more succinctly. The present study is an elaborate and detailed account of the richness, religious fervour and artistic excellence of the temple patronised by Pallavās, chōḷās and Vijayanagar rulers. The narrative touches also upon the structural, architectural, features various endowments down the ages, which have led to the land holdings and material assets of the temple. Generally, the temples of South India are characterized by a multiplicity of significance emanating from a complex network of role-relationships with the society around them. A temple in this particular connotation becomes a place of worship as well as a hub of inter related aspects
of the socio-cultural and socio-economic ethos of the successive ages. This study on Vilināṭhaswāmy temple at Tiruvilīmīlalai focusses on these aspects in a complementary manner.

Further, in the words of K.A. Nīlakantaśāstri "the multi grandeur of our numerous temples is a constant invitation to the study of local history, a study of each of these ancient foundations is bound to reveal how the rich and many sided life of the people centred round the temple as its nucleus". It is in the spirit of studying local history that the vast temple complex has been taken up for detailed research and no systematic attempt has been till now taken to make an elaborate study of the temple of Vilināṭhaswāmy temple of Tiruvilīmīlalai.

To facilitate the pursuit of research on the subject, about 101 epigraphs found on the walls and pillars of the three prākārās of the temple have been collected and recorded both in Annual Report of Epigraphy, by the Department of Archaeological Survey of India and in a separate volume on "Tiruvilīmīlalai Kalvettugal" by the Tamil Nādu State Department of Archaeology. These inscriptions give a comprehensive political history, socio economic conditions of the time, endowments, role of functionaries in the temple administration, rituals and festivals patronised by rulers and individuals.

Apart from the epigraphs stated above, other archaeological sources such as Epigraphiṭa Indica, South
Indian Inscriptions, Topographical list of inscriptions, Annual Report of Epigraphy, have also been consulted. Further literary works, and other secondary sources such as books, reports, research articles unpublished research works have also been consulted. Interviews of the scholar with the people and officials of the temple also form a source for the study.

With the help of these sources the research work delves into a study of the Vilinatham swamy temple at several levels such as (i) Location and physical features (ii) A historical background of the region (iii) Pujas and festivals (iv) Socio-economic environment of the temple (v) Temple administration (vi) Architecture (vii) Sculpture and painting which all throw light on the place of the temple in the socio-economic, religious and material culture of the people.

The second chapter on the location and physical features of the temple deals with the geographic placement and other situational features of the temple under study. The chapter includes the following in its purview; location of Tiruvilimilalai origin of the name Tiruvilimilalai, temples of Tiruvilimilalai, quality of the soil and material culture of the people.

The third chapter makes a study on the political background of the temple. Tiruvilimilalai had to bear the brunt of invasions and political fluctuations that occurred in Tanjavur area. In the midst of dynastic quarrels the religious institution was not disturbed much by the political rivalry. Each dynasty contributed to the enrichment of the temple
through the centuries. The history of the region is traced in the sangam period, pallava times, under chola hegemony, under Pandyan dynasty and the Vijayanagar empire and developments till the recent times are traced all with reference to literary sources and inscriptions.

The next chapter is focussed on the daily offer of worship to various deities at different times in a day which is of fundamental importance. A descriptive study is made on the daily pūjās and major and minor festivals celebrated in the temple in some months of the year.

The fifth chapter gives an account of the role of religious functionaries like bhattar, sivabrahmanās and officials like thānathār sribandarathār, devakanmigal, srikāryam, maheswarās, in the temple activities, transactions, finances and administration. While epigraphical records support the functions of the above, documented reports of the Tiruvāvuduthurai Ādinām provide information on the administration of the temple in the present day.

The sixth chapter illustrates the role of the temple in socio-economic life of the people. Based on the epigraphical records, the inter-action between the temple and different communities in the society is traced. Being a brahamadeya village, the brahmins played a vital role with their high level of knowledge. The Milalai Ainūrruvar (500 brahmins families of the village) were comparable to Thillai Mūvāvirathār (3000 brahmins families of Thillai or chidambaram) who had held control over the temple. The status
of other communities like chetti, vellalar, manrādi, kammālar which includes kollar or blacksmith, thachar or Carpenter thārrān or goldsmith are also discussed in relation to the temple. The position of women, with special reference to Pattālinangai who was closely associated with Rajādhirāja II have been discussed. An attempt has been made to highlight on the role of temple as the land owner and the contributions to rural economy. Various aspects of economic life such as land grants, sale and purchase of land by temple, and individuals, prices, units of measurements, coins in temple transaction have been illustrated. Further the religious significance of the place as gleaned from the hymns of saivite triumvirate has been discussed. The temple has a religious significance on account of

i the visit of the place by the Saivite triumvirate

ii the padikāsu which was the blessed money or wealth granted by Siva to Tirunāvukkarasar and Tirugñanasambandar for relieving the people from famine.

The fame attained by the temple during the Tevāram days continued to cast its spell on the devotees of the later times and contributed to the persisting influence of the temple among saivites.

The seventh chapter deals with the architectural features of the temple. Since most of the temples were not built at one time, architectural features are to be carefully integrated with the epigraphical data to study the date of the structure. An attempt is made in this chapter to reconstruct the phases
in which the temple took its present shape and to present a sequence of structural growth and expansion based on an analysis of the architectural features, with special reference to vouvāl nathāmandapā or hundred pillared hall which is an unique feature of the temple.

The next chapter is focussed on the sculptural art and painting. The temple has fine stone sculptures representing different aspects of saivite iconography made at different times in the course of history. The categories of sculpture in the temple are stone, bronze, coins, metal images and stucco images. A very rare painting is seen on the roof of arthamandapa on its southern extension. The entire roof is painted. The three panels of painting from east to west depict Kālinganardhanam, kamalam and Vēnugopa with gōpikās.

The concluding chapter sums up the findings.

The thesis is illustrated with photographic documentation both colour and black and white prints. The ground plan has been prepared and added. To explain the sanskrit and tamil terms used in the work a glossary has been given. A list of works consulted both primary and secondary has been added under bibliography.