CHAPTER I

TEMPLE AND SOCIETY
CHAPTER-I

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At the end of the nineteenth century, there were about seventy-five thousand temples in the Madras Presidency. Most of them were small and poor, employing a solitary priest and possessing a few brass ornaments. In each large village or town, there is one fairly substantial temple. Some temples are used exclusively by one caste or sect, others open to a wider section of the community. In a few large towns and places of particular sanctity, there were major shrines and pilgrim centres that attracted thousands of devotees every year. Most districts had one or two really wealthy temples. Such temples were concentrated in the southern most districts of Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Thiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and Tirunelveli. The great medieval empires had built such temples and contributed to the growth of temple activities. During Muslim invasions, these temples were affected. Among these were the Sri Meenakshi Temple in Madurai, the Brihadeeswara Temple at Thanjavur, the Rameswaram shrine across the straits of Ceylon, and the Rock Temple at Tiruchirappalli. These major shrines and more important local temples commanded a measure of wealth and influence which matched their fame and holiness.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Number of temples</th>
<th>Number Owning jewelery worth over one lakh</th>
<th>Number owning no land</th>
<th>Number with annual income</th>
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<td>Rs. 1000-10000</td>
<td>Rs. 10000 one lakh</td>
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<td>Tinnevelly</td>
<td>879</td>
<td>265</td>
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**Influence of Temples**

A number of factors can be attributed to the influence of these temples. To begin with, some temples were wealthy and a few astoundingly so. Since time immemorial, devotees had donated land, jewells and money for their maintenance. The chief shrines, patronised

1. In 1961, the census took particulars of the temples in Tamil Nadu. For some reason, the survey of temple in Tanjore district, the area with the richest temples, was not published (Census of India 1961, Vol. IX, Madras Part IX, pp.i-vi).
by emperors, nobles, warriors, merchants and land owners, had grown and flourished just as the monasteries of Medieval Europe did. In 1925, in Tirunelveli District, there were five Saivite shrines, each enjoying an annual income around a lakh of rupees. The richest of all the temples of South India was the shrine at Tirupathi (in Chittoor district, now in Andhra Pradesh). Its income stood at five lakhs per annum in the late nineteenth century and has since grown to cover a lakh a day.

In this process, many temples had amassed considerable holdings of land. The Tirupathi temple, which had acquired three complete taluks (revenue subdivisions averaging 3,75,000 acres each) by the early twentieth century, was one of the largest land owners of South India. In the 1930s, an estimated third of the land in Thanjavur, the richest of the Tamil districts, was tied to temples. These lands were leased out and the rents added to the temple income. Since many lands owned by temples enjoyed tax concessions, they were considered particularly worth renting. Since much of these lands came fortuitously from benefactors, they tended to be scattered over a wide area. But by buying lands in the immediate vicinity of the temple and by investing much of their income in the neighbourhood, the temples tended to concentrate their economic power over their localities. Firstly, the temples provided many with jobs—priests to perform rituals, administrators to manage the income and lands, craftsmen to maintain the fabric of the temple and the articles of worship and many others. These jobs were highly prized as they brought status and opportunities for personal advancement, and there was fierce

2. G.O. No. 3547, Local Self-Government Department (hereinafter referred as LSG), 2 August 1926.
competition for the most important posts. When the top administrative
job at the Madurai Sri Meenakshi Temple fell vacant, it was usual for
hundred men, mostly of considerable local standing, to apply.\(^4\) Secondly,
the temples issued valuable contracts for repairing the buildings and idols
and for supplying the needs of festivals and ceremonies.\(^5\) Thirdly, the
temples often built shops and markets in their premises. In Madras City,
some of the big markets were attached to temples and in Tirunelveli, the
big temple ran the principal market. The annual ‘Chittrai’ festival at the
Madurai Temple was also the occasion of the biggest annual fair where
some hundred thousand heads of cattle changed hands. By managing and
leasing shops and stalls, and by running these annual fairs, temple
exercised a considerable control over the commercial life of the locality.\(^6\)
Fourthly, the temples often acted as money-lenders, thus both increasing
their economic power and their total wealth.\(^7\)

The temples also played a larger part in the social life of their
localities. Firstly, they organised festivals and patronised the arts. Temple
music, dancing and temple sculpture are the traditional art forms of Tamil
Nadu. Secondly, they also patronised learning. Many of the larger temples
ran traditional Vedantic and Siddhantic schools. In recent times, they have
financed secular and scientific education. Thirdly, the \textit{devadasi} girls,
dedicated to the temple to be trained to sing and dance before the gods.

\(^4\) \textit{Hindu}, 11 November 1922.
\(^5\) In 1935, the committee in charge of the Madura Sri Meenakshi gave a contract
worth Rs. 5000 to the nephew of a Committee Member. A few weeks later, the
Committee was captured by a rival faction, and the contract was revoked and
re-issued to the brother of a new member of the committee. (G.O. No. 1984
LSG, 2 May 1935).
\(^6\) G.O. No. 1973, LSG, 6 April 1934.
\(^7\) \textit{Madras Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee}, Vol.2, Madras, 1930, p.279.
They also provided more worldly entertainment to the ordinary mortals. Fourthly, temples fed the poor and gave grants to charitable institutions.\textsuperscript{8}

Moreover, temples were arbiters of social status in the locality. The right to enter certain parts of the temple, the right to participate in certain ceremonies and the order of precedence in certain sites and festivals were important visible expressions of the accepted hierarchy of communities and individuals in the locality.\textsuperscript{9} Temples were both makers and breakers of status. Groups and individuals translated an improved economic position into heightened social status by winning ratification from the temple. In medieval times, successful warriors often prevailed upon temple priests to perform ceremonies which accorded them a new ritual status commensurate with their military achievements.\textsuperscript{10} More, recently, the Nattukottai Chettis, who were socially and ritually unremarkable in the early nineteenth century, have spent large sums from their fortunes they made in banking, to build, repair and maintain some of the most important temples in the region. They now have a reputation for sanctity and a ritual status almost as impressive as their bank balances. Low-caste groups have agitated for admission to temples as part of their campaigns for improved status, and arriviste families have shown that they have really arrived by getting a hand in managing temples. The Porayar Nadar family of Thanjavur is a good example. Nadars were considered too lowly to be admitted into many temples, and the Porayar family had grown rich by a very ‘unclean’ business, namely, the distillation of country liquor on a large scale. Nevertheless, their business gave them money and this money was placed at the disposal of a venerated and


\textsuperscript{9} Mckim Marriott, \textit{Caste Ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan}, Poona, 1960, p.33.

influential religious leader to advocate on his own behalf. The ill-gotten money was also used to oil the machinery of elections to the Committee in charge of local temples and this strategy worked. A member of the Porayar Nadar family was soon appointed in the temple administration. But this spectacle of a Nadar on the Temple Committee in orthodox Thanjavur created a stir in the 1890s, but within the next thirty years, it had become the custom that a Nadar, preferably from the rich Porayar family, was allowed to sit on the Temple Committee as a mark of their local status.¹¹

Temples were not the only religious institutions. There were also the maths, small monastic institutions, where a man of holiness and learning (the madhathipathi or Pandara sanidhi) lived with his close disciples.¹² Many men of standing from both near and far, looked to the maths and their madhathipathis for spiritual guidance. As these devotees had over the years endowed the maths with land and gifts, their spiritual hegemony had engendered something more temporal and material in course of time. Maths often administered as subordinate to temples and charitable institutions as well. Since their possessions and those of their satellites, as well as their followers, were spread over a wide area, the chief maths' influence had a correspondingly wide range of influence. In the early twentieth century, one of the largest was the Saivite math at Tiruvaduthurai near Mayavaram in Thanjavur district.

This math has large endowments in the district of Tirunelveli (25,000 acres), Madurai (1000 acres) and Thanjavur (3000 acres) as well as small possessions in other places. The total annual income was


¹². The Maths were begin by the Vaishnavite sage Sankaracharya as an instrument for reasserting the Hindu faith against Buddhism. (Ramaswamy Tatachariar, D., *The Vanavamalai Temple and Mutt*, Tinnevelly, 1937, pp.30-31).
estimated at two lakhs of rupees. The head of the math appoints the managers and priests of some fifteen temples in Mayavaram and other districts. He also controls their funds. Some of these temples were of great importance. The head was also the guru of a number of private persons in this district, who visit him and give presents on the anniversary day of the founder of the math.\textsuperscript{13}

The Tiruvaduthurai math also controlled 130 subordinate maths and possessed a library worth Rs. 30,000.\textsuperscript{14} Another Saivite math at nearby Dharmapuram owned 2,500 acres in Thanjavur district and another 12,500 acres of land outside Thanjavur and controlled twenty-seven temples.\textsuperscript{15} The Vaishnavite math at Nanguneri in Tirunelveli district had an income of Rs. 60,000 from its lands and Rs. 6,000 from its properties in Tirunelveli town. It also owned a coffee estate and had accumulated new properties worth two and a quarter of lakh rupees in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It supervised two hundred subordinate maths, many of which also owned properties and, counted among its devotees, the Maharajah of Bharatpur from far-off Rajasthan.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Economic and Social Activity}

Temples and maths had economic and social power in the locality. Owning lands, commanding vast incomes, often controlling markets and credit, dispensing valuable jobs and contracts, organizing festivals, patronizing art and learning, maintaining charities and regulating social status, the temples unsurprisingly were drawn into local

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Kandaswami Pillai, V., \textit{Tiruvaduthurai Kurisanam} (Tamil), Madras, 1921, pp.1-12.
\item \textsuperscript{15} \textit{Hindu}, 4 March 1925, 5 July 1931. Also Anon, \textit{Dharmapuram Adhinam Mutt and Temples}, Madras, n.d.
\item \textsuperscript{16} G.O. No. 350, LSG, 10 August 1926. Also Ramaswamy Tatachariar, D., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.92-94
\end{itemize}
politics also. Control over the temple meant control over land, commerce and credit, a portfolio of patronage in jobs, contracts and gifts, a role in regulating social status and the prestige of managing the chief social events of the year. Factions commonly advertised their local supremacy by performing lavish and holy rituals in the temple. In Madurai in 1923, after a long and bitter fight between the town’s leading factions, the victorious party performed kumbhabhishekham, one of the holiest and most expensive ceremonies, in the Sri Meenakshi Temple. Their opponents, visibly humbled, threatened to go to court and to organize demonstrations to disrupt the ceremony. The temple was thus a source of power and a symbol of dominance in the rivalries for local resources and status which was what politics in the locality was all about.

Control over Temples

The temples were controlled by many sections of the society. Some temples are still controlled by the families of their original founders. Some were considered the private property of the Zamindars, some were controlled by a local caste group (such as the Kanyaka Parameshwari temples whose management committees were chosen by the local Komuti community), some were controlled by a math and in some, the temple functionaries themselves had usurped control. This still left a large number in which control was vested in managers, trustees and committees chosen from the local community. Since the

17. Hindu, 18 February and 2 July 1923.
18. These temples acted as the focus of Komati Communal Organization. They collected communal funds, organized scholarship, ran libraries and so on (G.O. No. 3666, LSG, 8 September 1982, State Archives, Hyderabad).
19. The famous Sri Nataraja temple at Chidambaram was entrusted to community of Brahman priests Khom as Dikshitars. (Ramakrishna Aiyer, V.G., The Economy of a South Indian Temple, Madras, 1940, pp.10-20).
time of the Cholas, each temple normally had a manager and a trustee who shared executive control of the temple and its endowments, personnel and rituals. These officers were appointed and supervised by a committee which usually had jurisdiction over several temples in the area. The Committee was chosen by election, co-option or appointment from among the local elite. But this was indeed an ideal pattern.

The control of temples was far too important to be so neatly regimented. When government investigated temple administration in the 1920s, it found that proper account of receipts and expenditure of temples was seldom maintained. Surplus money was not always properly invested and temples lands were in some cases leased out in favour of relatives and friends of trustees and in some cases, alienated on inadequate grounds or for personal ends. Owing to factions among trustees, services were often neglected. Alienation of service inams not infrequently took place. The Temple Committees were in many cases defunct or dormant and those Committees which showed some activity sometimes failed to exercise effective control and supervision for want of funds or for other reasons. The position was aggravated by the fact that a large number of temples were not under the control of any committee.20

While the poorer temples suffered from neglect, the richer ones were more often burdened with excessive exploitation. Temples enjoyed a notable command over local status and resources. Some of those involved in temple management were ‘other worldly men’, but many were chiefly concerned with the worldly rewards of local power and status. A British officer described one mahant of the math as ‘a clever worldly-wise, English-speaking gentleman, who, if it were not for his sanctimonious attire, might have been mistaken for a prosperous

lawyer'. These men generally had interests in many other aspects of local control. An example of the politician masquerading as temple commissioner was C. Maduravanam Pillai of Thanjavur district. In the 1920s, he was trustee of three temples and President of the local temple committee. Wearing a different hat, he was a lawyer, landowner, secretary of the district landowners' association, President of the village officers' conference, Member of the taluk and district boards and district education council, legal adviser and receiver of the biggest estate in the district, a dabbler in co-operative societies, leader of the local congress and twice an elected member of the Provincial Legislature.

Since the importance of the temples had brought them into the market-place, neither sect nor belief was a barrier to taking a hand in their management. It was not uncommon for Vaishnavites to be chosen as trustees and managers of Saivite temples if this fitted the interest of the faction in control. F.G. Natesan, who constantly meddled in temple matters in Tiruchirappalli was a Christian. As a leader of one of the town's major factions, he could not afford to ignore temple politics. In North Arcot district, one of the leading citizens was Abdul Hakim, a devout Muslim commander of the faithful in the locality and a dealer in leather, an occupation that was very demeaning in the eyes of the Hindus. Nevertheless, Abdul Hakim was closely in touch with local Hindu shrines, patronized Hindu charitable and religious institutions and even donated an elephant to one of the biggest Hindus' temples. In

23. A Vaishnavite was appointed trustee of the Madurai Sri Meenakshi temple, one of the most important Saivite shrines in South India. (*Hindu*, 9 November 1930).
Madurai, the pilgrim capital of South India, another Muslim, K.N. Allauddin Rowther, was embroiled in temple politics. Allauddin Rowther was right in the thick of the town’s factions jockeying for control of the Meenakshi temple. He involved in fierce disputes over the Meenakshi temple which erupted in 1921.25 The Raja of Devacottai in Ramanathapuram district, in administering his estate, made no distinction between the temples and his lay property. Consequently, the Devacottai temples were administered impartially by six Christians and two Muslims.26 In Erode, the temple committee had no religious bias at all. For a quarter of a century, it was run by E.V. Ramasami Naicker, a militant atheist.27

Misuse of Temple Funds and Properties

Some temple administrators used the funds and properties for unusual purposes. One Chetti in Madurai used the temples funds to provide capital for his shops, and another Chetti used it for speculating in land.28 In Ramanathapuram, a temple administrator set up the 'Rayali's Peace Memorial Industrial Institute', obviously a charitable and educational venture but actually a car-repair workshop.29 In Madurai again, a temple trustee used funds which he had collected for repairs to the temple as capital for a lottery. He started lottery in the temple’s

25. G.O. No. 1384, Local and Municipal Department, Municipal Section, (hereinafter referred as L and M.M), 16 August 1917. Also G.O. No. 477, Public Department, 28 July 1921.
27. For Ramaswami Naicker, as for Marudavanam Pillai, the temple committee was one part of a large local empire. At the height of his local power, Naicker had a hand in at least twenty-nine local boards and associations, ranging from caste and cultural clubs to the municipality and police committee. (Sami Chidambaranar, Tamilar Talaivar, (Tamil), Erode, 1960, pp.64-65).
28. Hindu, 9 November 1922 and 15 December 1922.
29. G.O. No. 4139, LSG, 25 September 1926.
Some properties belonging to a Madurai Math in Salem were used to house a doctor's surgery, a lawyer's office and a private bank.\textsuperscript{31}

There was widespread embezzlement of temple funds. The extent to which temple funds were siphoned off into private pockets was impossible to calculate as it was difficult to detect and even more difficult to prove. The accused often remained in charge of the temple's books and funds long enough to establish his innocence. Even then there were enough clues to suggest that misappropriation was carried out on a large scale. There were five successive mahants in charge of the a great temple between 1863 and 1910, controlling an income that (officially) reached six and a half lakhs per annum at the end of that period. The first was found guilty of misappropriating nearly a lakh of rupees, the second over two lakhs, the fourth, a modest man, only one lakh, and the fifth six lakhs. The third was actually found guilty of taking two lakhs, but faced charges alleging another fourteen lakhs by the time when he died.\textsuperscript{32} In the 1930s, the Raja of Ramanathapuram, a big Zamindar with interests in many temples including the wealthy pilgrim centre at Rameswaram, was said to have diverted the revenue from temple lands, moved six lakhs of rupees from the temple treasury to his own bank account and melted down gold and silver offerings to use as surety for loans he took from Marwari Moneylenders.\textsuperscript{33} When the rich Sankarankoil temple in Tirunelveli district was forced to produce

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} G.O. No. 1280, LSG, 8 April 1932.
\item \textsuperscript{31} \textit{Hindu}, 28 August 1936.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Subramania Aiyer, P.S., and Venkatapathi Aiyer, D., to Sivaswami Aiyer, P.S., 22 February 1933, \textit{P.S. Sivaswami Aiyer Papers}, National Archives of India.
\end{itemize}
accounts in 1925, the trustee promptly resigned and fled. The police placed a guard on the collection boxes during the next big festival in case he returned for another shake at the pagoda-tree. But men who ran temples in order to merely make money were less common than those who aimed to exploit their resources more systematically for political purposes over a longer period. It was the attraction of power rather mere plunder that motivated most men in their struggles for control over temples.

The struggles to control temples and maths were the most spectacular aspect of local politics, not merely, because they were often violent, but because they involved all and sundry from the leading local citizen to the meanest temple servant. Many of the disputes in fact originated among the temple servants who frequently organised into gangs squabbling for petty advantages within the walls. This sort of in-fighting was rife at a great temple in 1905 and ended with the murder of the Mahant by a priest (ritualist). It was a common sight in the maths where the succession to the madhatipathi usually passed on to one of the close disciples and gave plenty of opportunity for faction. A dispute of this sort began in the Sringeri Math in the 1870s. The price at which one of the disputants was bought off in an out-of-court settlement was an amount not less than Rs. 6,000, some land and an annual grant of Rs. 1,500. Since the prizes were so great that the quarrels were rarely confined within the walls of the institution. Lawyers, agitators, devotees, politicians and mobs soon joined in. Even the local officials found it difficult to stand aloof. In 1887, the District Magistrate of North Arcot reported:

34. Hindu, 23 September 1925.
Holy places, where there was an abundance of other people’s money in the hands of priests and where wholesale debauchery, intrigue and extortion were chronically rife, proved the ruin of most of the native subordinates who served in them.  

Succession Dispute

The Tiruvaduthurai math witnessed the succession dispute when the madhathipathi died in 1920. The succession dispute lasted for fifteen years. The madhathipathi died in rather suspicious circumstances and one of the disciples who aspired to succeed him was charged with murder. Before the case could come to court, two other disciples had been relieved of the cares of this life, and one of the factions had used force by bringing in a mob of 10,000 to hold up the madhathipathi’s funeral. Riot after riot followed until the matter went into the courts and rested there until 1935.

Other Disputes

Other disputes were sparked off by temple administrators or by local politicians. The Zamindars of Sivagangai and Devacottai, neighbours in Ramanathapuram district, were rivals for control over a lucrative and prestigious temple. When Sivagangai usurped control, the Devacottai party took up arms and turned up with a mob and cart loads of bricks to lay siege

38. Swami Subramania Thambiran, Tiruvavuduthurai Adhina Guruparambarai, (Tamil), Chidambaram, 1925, pp.10-16.
39. Hindu, 7 May 1920, 9 February 1922, 8 August 1935 and 19 August 1935. In the nearby Dharmapuram Math, the Madhadhipathi was murdered in 1923 and a similar series of riots and court cases lasting until 1936 followed. (Hindu, 4 March 1925, 5 July 1931 and 28 August 1936).
to the temple. In Madurai in 1921, a dispute over the administration of the Sri Meenakshi temple escalated into a minor civil war. One of the factions seeking the vacant post of temple manager fomented a strike among the temple servants which disrupted one of the big festivals of the year and so dragged the whole town into the sordid affair. Huge public meetings were held and one faction actually hired professional agitators. After several riots, a sit-down in the town centre, a siege of the temple offices, a pitched battle in the temple precincts, finally the matter went the courts. The affair spawned ten important court cases and several minor ones, including prosecution of the police for entering the temple with their boots on when they tried to quell a riot. The legal battles lasted for five years.

Even in places where committees administered their temples quite well, the fierceness of the battles for control were only slightly tempered by rules and regulations. In Kumbakonam, a faction that was desperate to remain in control of the temple committee, changed the dates for election to the committee, held the election in secret to outwit their enemies, and used large sums of money and an out-of-date electoral roll to get an ally elected. In 1915, the temple committee elections at Cuddalore had to be called off 'on account of rowdyism'. In Tirunelveli, two factions provoked a confrontation by demanding that the important Navaratri festival be held on dates other than the dates originally fixed. In the courts, the lawyers for the two factions argued the case with complex points from Vedantic and Siddhantic texts, while

40. Hindu, 8 April and 9 April 1921.
41. G.O. No. 477 (Public), 27 July 1921. Also Hindu, 15 April 1921, 26 April 1921, 5 May 1921 and 9 August 1921. Most of the cases failed for want of independent evidence.
42. Hindu, 1 October 1885, 8 February 1915 and 24 March 1915.
43. Hindu, 11 February 1915.
outside the court, the crowds tried to hold 'rogue' festivals which had to be dispersed by the police.\textsuperscript{44}

No other institution in the local society was a match to the wealthier temples for their combination of wealth, patronage and prestige. Even after local government boards had been set up in the 1880s and after they had been given greater powers and funds in the 1920s, their revenues in most districts were only marginally greater than those of the wealthier temples and were far more fettered by regulations. Control of the temple was thus crucial to the local balance of power.\textsuperscript{45}

**Pujas and Festivals**

Pujas and festivals formed an integral part of temple worship. A holy house of gods and goddesses, temple becomes a place of worship where people gather to think of the creator and pray to him. It catered to the religious needs of the people and provided a link between man and god and earthly life and divine life. Temple expressed the sincere devotion and there of the rulers and ruled are treated equal. It communicated the message that the human beings are to be humble and simple in the abodes of gods and goddess. Worshipping gods in temples not only infuses divinity and purity into the heart of the devotees but their religious impulses and sentiments find a natural outlet. They believed that if gods and goddesses were appeased, there would be rain and prosperity. Therefore elaborate rituals and ceremonies were rapidly evolved and the heavenly beings were pleased with the offerings of abhishek\textsuperscript{a}s (sacred bath), oblations, rituals and festivals.\textsuperscript{46} The gods and goddesses enshrined in a temple were looked after by a group of

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Hindu}, 20 October 1928.

\textsuperscript{45} Christopher Baker, \textit{loc.cit.}, p.79.

\textsuperscript{46} Desayar, M., \textit{Temples and Social Integration.}, Nattalam, 2000, p.7.
servants who discharged specific duties with utmost devotion from dawn to dusk. To maintain the divinity of the temple, the deity is provided with royal paraphernalia of a throne, umbrella and whisk and the worship of the deity is attended by royal pageantry, together with music, dance and a variety of lighting of lamps. In this way, in the temple, the potentially divine becomes visibly manifested and therefore approachable by man. The rituals and worship, which the priests performed in temple on behalf of the society, are believed to promote happiness and enabled them to obtain absolution and various other favours and privileges. Hence, pujas and festivals were regularly conducted. This not only maintained the divinity of the temple for ever but the sanctity of the people too.

The daily worship in a temple is known as nityapuja whereas the occasional ceremonies in connection with the special festival is called naimittika. The daily offerings are done to preserve the sanctity of the temple. Generally, the ritual in a temple consists of four celebrations which take place at sunrise, noon, sunset and midnight. The ceremonial worship is conducted based on the traditions and the agamas which governed the respective temples. For instance, in the Varadaraja Swami temple at Kanchi, the ceremonial worship takes place five times a day, early in the morning, twelve in the noon, in the evening at six, at eight in the night and the last one at nine in the night after which the temple is closed. In the Meenakshi temple at Madurai, the daily worship consists of eight separate occasions, each taking half to one hour to be completed. In the Rameswaram temple, rituals are performed six times a day. According to pancaratragama, the daily pujas were expected to be

offered from a minimum of one to maximum of twelve times. Almost everyone in the village offered worship at any one of the pujas according to their convenience because they believed that religion not only determines the status of a man in society but its principles regulate his manner of life also.

**Festivals and Concourse of People**

Apart from pujas, rites and rituals, impressive celebrations of various festivals too brought vast concourse of people to take part in the ritualist perambulation of deities. Primarily religious in character, these festivals provided an opportunity to the people to fulfill religious obligations and vows. Known as *tirunal* in Tamil, the temple festivals were ceremonies of social gathering and enjoyment. Festivals were broadly classified into three categories. The festivals that were conducted regularly on dates significant to the deity installed in a temple and were celebrated on the days fixed according to the astronomical calendar belonged to the first category. All festivals instituted by the kings, nobles and other public and charitable institutions formed the second group. The conduct of special festivals is very common in many of the temples. For example, on royal orders, land was granted for the conduct of Virapandyan, *sandhi* ⁴⁹ and to celebrate a festival ending on the day of Mula in Masi (February-March), the birth star of the king.⁵⁰ Festivals arranged for the propitiation of gods and goddesses at times of distress and difficulties such as famine, flood or drought came under the last group.

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Centre of Learning Activities

Education is the bedrock for any secular achievement of mankind. The importance of education was realised by the early Tamils. Tiruvalluvar extols learning as the only imperishable wealth and the learned are honoured highly not only in their own land, but all over the world. The Sangam literature throws light of the prevalence of education in ancient Tamil Nadu. It referred to the pial or portico schools of the villages. During that period, education was widespread and all the people, irrespective of caste or sex, enjoyed the benefits of education. However, with the onset of bhakti movement and the spread of temple construction as its consequence, the function of educational institutions too were carried out by most of the temples of prominence. As no other public agency including the state had taken up the responsibility of providing education, temple became the main educational agency. A number of major temples provided adequate facilities to run educational institutions in their own precincts. Such institutions attached with the temples were variously known as ghatikas, salas, guhais and mathas.

The growth of educational systems and values necessitated the maintenance of libraries for the easy reference to the teachers and the taught. Inscriptions refer to the existence of libraries in the Ranganatha Swami temple at Srirangam, the Nataraja Temple, Chidambaram and the Tuvalapatti Appan Temple at Seranmadevi. These libraries were

51. *Tirukkural*, 400.
known as **saraswathi bhandarams**. Two damaged inscriptions provide information regarding the elaborate arrangement made for the library attached to the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram. Further, one record\(^{56}\) of Jatavarman Sundarapandya gives valuable information about the organisation and administration of the library under the orders of a chief. It states that this library was originally established by one Swamidevar. In this library, some twenty scholars proficient in different branches of learning were employed to copy down various *granthas* (books) and manuscripts. Another record\(^{57}\) of the temple provides some information regarding the activities of the same library. It records a grant of land for the maintenance of several persons employed there. The nature of work is also referred to in it. Provision was made for writing, and readings various Sanskrit and Tamil works. Among the books, special mention is made of the *puranas*, *jyothi sastra* and *siddhanta-ratnakara* of *somesvara*. As libraries became the essential limbs of education, the ancient Tamils have promoted such institutions without any reservation. Thus, the temples stood for the growth of education. Though education was the control of a privileged few, these centres of education disseminated religious ideas to all the people which mobilised them under one umbrella. These educational centres rendered meritorious services to the society as the seed bed of character, citadel of discipline and fountain of knowledge. These noble institutions served the people in various ways.

**Recreation Club**

Temples preserved the cultural of the Tamils. They were the traditional centres fostering the growth of civilization in all its

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ramifications in literature, art, music, dance, drama and other fine arts. The temples not only patronised fine arts but also preserved the great traditions of Tamil music, dance, drama (iyal, isai and natakam) in their pristine glory. As centre of worship, temple was busy with the incoming and outgoing devotees every day. In the midst of the crowd, to ease their tension and to make them happy, cultural programmes were conducted periodically on a grand scale in most of the temples. In the temples, a number of festivals were conducted daily, weekly, monthly and annually, which attracted tens of thousands of people from far and near. On such occasions, they not only offered worship but participated in the variety entertainments. Many of them got an opportunity to meet and mingle together, exchange their views freely and frankly and enrich each other on cultural ethos. It enabled them to develop mutual understanding and broaden their friendship and relationship.

Temples were the creative centres and stood as visible symbols of the achievement of mankind. They served as repositories of all other branches of fine arts like architecture, sculpture in stone and bronze, painting and jewellery which were preserved in good stead. Known as Oviyam in Tamil, painting as an art in space was used to depict certain scenes of nature, human activities, thoughts, art and traditions and ideas of religion. It gives mental solace, brings prosperity, removes adversity, purges heart and eradicates anxiety and induces pure delight to the visitors. Therefore, painting is appreciated as the best of all arts. The paintings on the walls, panelled ceilings and gateways of some of the temples show scenic representations of the Purans. The artists through the art openly displayed its innate themes and the images were made visible in architectural monuments. The sculptures which adorned the temples communicated the religious ideas and revealed the contemporary
social life. They were not only known for their aesthetic beauty but considered as the visual mirror of the society. So temple was the centre of intellectual and artistic activity. The life style depicted there instigated the people to lead a honest living without pride or prejudice. The holy shrines by the splendour of their massive structure and the fine sculptures to be found therein prompted the worshippers to lead a life of purity and devotion because the temple was viewed as the embodiment of beauty, perfection and grace.

No doubt, temples were the great teachers of piety to all classes of people. *Silpasastra* emphasizes the idea that the worship of the images in stone, metal or clay leads the seeker of liberation from rebirth to his goal.  

The artists gave visible form to the virtues of human beings. The sculptured and painted scenes from mythologies about the deities and other scenes of dance, music and drama and other fine arts are rich feasts to the eyes. The beauty and elegance of the sculptures elevated the peoples' mind. The grand decorations that were made during processions and festivals kept the people in touch with the art and enhanced their capacity to appreciate beauty.

Thousands of devotees visit the temples of prominent places to enjoy the treasures of art preserved in temples. They not only spend their time happily but these monuments from the past help them to think of the achievements and creative minds of the people of the past. While enjoying the views and scenery depicted in the temples, the devotees completely forget their distresses, difficulties and disparities which in turn enable them to attain purity of thought, generosity of mind, humanity of heart and divinity of soul. A nucleus around which all

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artistic activities concentrated, temples became recreation clubs and motivated the people to integrate their enjoyment with other arts. The calm and cool atmosphere, which prevailed in temple complexes, induced the people to take rest and meditate. In doing so, their hearts vibrated only the idea of god which made them ignore their arrogance, to think of all values and virtues of life and lead a life of simplicity, friendship, co-operation and co-existence.

An Employer

Temple played a remarkable role in the economic life of the people too. They served as one of the biggest employers next to the state. With the growth of temples, their rites, rituals and festivals, the flow of munificent donations and endowments of immense value also increased. No wonder temples required the services of a large number of people to look after their multifarious activities. As a result, they provided employment to a large section of the people of different communities directly or indirectly. The direct employment refers to those servants who were employed permanently as regular staff while indirect employment refers to the casual labourers employed to cultivate the temple lands or to look after the livestocks donated to the temples or providing various services like the oil mongers, weavers, washermen and others.

A number of skilled and unskilled persons were employed while the temple was under construction and before its consecration. Different categories of servants were employed to look after the various functions of the temples. They were categorised as administrative staff, spiritual functionaries, quasi-religious functionaries and menial and manual labourers. In all these categories, people of various castes such as the Brahmins, Vellalars, Mudalis, Kaikkolas, Kammalars, Kusavars, Konars,
Chettis, Vaniyars, barbers, washermen and others were utilized. These occupations helped them to earn an honest and peaceful livelihood. The Rajarajesvaram inscriptions\(^{59}\) of Rajaraja I describe the employment of not less than 609 persons in different categories from various castes which shows beyond doubt that the temples were a major source of employment to the people of different walks of life and different areas. But, during the previous epoch of the Pallavas and early Pandyas, it had only limited staff members. However, in course of time, the total staff strength of each temple increased, but varied according to its size, the number of pujas and festivals and above all, the income and importance.

In recognition of their services, they were remunerated either in the form of land or cash or commodities. In some temples, they were provided with cooked rice balls and clothing too. But, their remuneration varied from temple to temple and cadre to cadre according to the economic position of each temple. On special occasions and festivals seasons, the temple provided double wages to the employees,\(^{60}\) probably for their hard labour. The vrittis such as vedavritti,\(^{61}\) puranavritti,\(^{62}\) pulamaivritti,\(^{63}\) and vaidhyavritti\(^{64}\) were created for their livelihood. The land bestowed to the temple servant was called bhogam and jivitam. But they had no right to sell or mortgage the lands and they possessed only the right to enjoy the income or revenue from the said land.

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Most of them were given quarters in the tirumadaivilagam (streets around the temple) itself. Separate cheris were created for the residential purpose of devadasis. Rajaraja I built new colonies exclusively for them called talichcheri and allotted one house for each dancing girl (a total of 400 girls) of the Rajarajesvaram temple, Thanjavur. The Temple staff had an enviable position and enjoyed a high status in society. The priests of the Chidambaram temple had the privilege of crowning the kings. However, for their lapses and malpractices, they were punished severely. A temple accountant who was guilty of gramadroham (against the interest of village) was dismissed from service. In fact, temples provided large scale employment opportunities which was a striking feature in the socio-economic life of the people.

People of various communities who served in the temples not only earned their daily bread but enabled them a peaceful co-existence which is a good symptom of unity as well as community development. People from different communities attended to various types of work in the temple. This created a perfect and harmonious relationship between the divergent people. They carried out their allotted duties with joy and dedication. Thus the scattered people were united under the roof of the temple. This induced a sense of involvement of all members of the society in the affairs of the temple. No doubt, it was a co-operative effort of all, for the good of all, who believed in the temple as an institution for the promotion of overall welfare of the people. During pujas and festivals, all these people served together and stood for the


promotion of temple culture. Temple welfare was their own welfare. As long as temples flourished, the employees too lived happily.

**Courts of Justice**

The Tamil Country, a land of temples and god fearing people was not free from crime and punishment as elsewhere. The rulers of medieval Tamil Nadu, though known for administrative skill and ability, their empire witnessed crime and violence in some parts. Therefore, the kings as guardians of social life, paid adequate attention to maintain law and order strictly. They even served as supreme magistrates and protected the subjects from injustice and anarchy based on dharmic principles. A king who ruled justly and guarded his realm was conceived as god to men. To cherish this glory and noble idea, they never spared the wicked and guilty and punished them severely as it was one of their basic functions. Any attempt to subvert the social order was viewed by them as a fundamental crime.

Elaborate arrangements were made to trap the culprits to restore peace and order of the kingdom. The highways and trunk roads were infested with robbers. Villages and towns were guarded by the specially appointed guards or police, namely, the urkavalar and padikappar. At road junctions, the urkavalar stood with bows and arrows to ward off robbers. Similarly every village in the medieval

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68. *Kuruntogai*, 12;16.
Tamil country had a complement of well paid padikappar. For their maintenance, money was collected from the villagers. Moreover, in certain places, the villagers themselves made agreements to check robbery or decoity within the specified limits of the villages. Besides, the rulers too made frequent tours to different parts of the empire, sometimes they and camped at different places. During such tours, they camped in the temples in the absence of palaces, conducted enquiries about the law and order situation, if any, and solved them on the spot. Royal visit helped them gather first hand information about the affairs of the people and the activities of government officials in the day-to-day administration. Thus, all possible efforts were undertaken to maintain peace by punishing the guilty and protecting the innocent.

The temples of Tamil Land served as law courts with civil, criminal and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Based mainly on local traditions and customs and the dharmastras, the temple authorities dispensed justice free of charges. They believed that courts could render justice only within the framework of the law but dharma transcended all laws and helped the people to settle their disputes and differences amicably. Severe measures were employed to detect crimes and locate the real culprits. The criminals and culprits were punished according to the gravity and nature of crimes committed. But, in certain cases, strict adherence to rules and regulations was not followed in awarding punishments.

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73. Inscriptions of Pudukkottai State, No. 491.
The concessions were given to the culprits according to the hierarchy of caste, status and the position the person held. Even in cases of crime being grave, exceptions from punishments were given to the high caste people, for they were considered above the law of the state from the dharmic perspective. It appeared, therefore, that the temple authorities were biased in their discharge of justice. But except this leniency, all other offenders particularly of low castes were strictly punished. Those who underwent punishments were never allowed to contest in the election to the village assemblies. Many culprits were branded as traitors for their rajadroha, sivadroha and gramadroha acts. It spoiled their personality and charishma for ever. They were looked down upon in the society. Records were properly maintained for registering the nature of crime, the methods of detection of crimes and the types of punishments awarded to each culprit.  

The sculptural depiction of the punished was also resorted to only to make others aware of the types of punishment. Representations are found in the Suchindram temple to prove this point. In this temple, even today there is an image of a man sitting with his palms pegged down to the ground as a punishment for misappropriating the temple funds. This was a sort of punishment inflicted in those days for unlawful actions. These methods created in the public a kind of fear which prevented them from committing crimes of any kind against any individual, institution or the state. Exceptions and partialities in giving punishments on the basis of caste could not maintain uniformity in the administration of justice. The temples of Tamil land played a vital role in the field of jurisprudence. By upholding justice, temples tried to maintain peace and harmony in the state.

Relief Measures

The temple was the most benevolent institution in the land of Tamil Nadu. The temples of each locality strove for the material and moral progress of all classes of people irrespective of caste, creed or sex. As such, temples influenced the lives of the people in several ways. The tremendous impact made by the temple on the progress and development of the society was significant. In short, temple functioned as the main instrument of social integration and economic prosperity.

Next to free-feeding charity, the temples of Tamil land carried out some other philanthropic activities too. The temples of several places maintained rest-houses and watersheds known as chatrams and tannirpandals (water shed) respectively. Most of the places in Tamil land had no proper board and lodging facilities as in the modern days. Several places were prone to severe drought, especially during summer season. Consequently, obtaining drinking water itself was very difficult. Therefore, both the rulers and the ruled felt the need for establishing such centres wherever necessary. To realise this noble cause, they endowed liberally the temples, in different forms such as villages, lands, cash, grain, various articles and on certain occasions effected tax concessions to meet the expenses of rest houses and water sheds. For instance, a record of Konerinmaikondan was found engraved in the Cholisvara temple at Pon Amaravathi in Pudukkotai district, registers a tax free gift of a village, namely, Virattalai for the maintenance of a watershed at the same place for the use of the people of the locality. Similarly, an epigraph of Virakeralavarman from Parakkai in Kanyakumari distirct, refers to a gift of land by a private individual for

the upkeep of a watershed in that village. The record further states that
the benevolent king, knowing the importance of the charity exempted the
land from the payment of some taxes levied on it. Several such instances
are referred to in many inscriptions engraved on the walls of the temples
of different places.

Thus, the rest houses and watersheds were made in various places
which thrived thanks to public benefactions. In some places, the
watersheds were attached to the wayside choultries. To perpetuate this
charity forever, the donors entrusted the responsibility to the respective
temples of their locality. Such institutions, flourishing at various places,
not only supplied drinking water to the thirsty strangers, travellers,
traders and pilgrims free of cost but also provided pickles, salt and fire
wood.79 These facilities enabled them to stay comfortably and to prepare
the needed food materials for their sustenance. It is interesting to state
that in order to supply water, wells were also dug near the watershed.
During the region of Rajaraja I, a private individual dug a well at Ukkal
near Cheyyar to distribute water to a watershed established near it. So
also a record of Kulotunga I dated A.D. 1118 engraved in the
Ambalappaswamy temple at Kovilangulam in Aruppukottai describes
that the donor dug a well for the use of Jain devotees and endowed land
for its maintenance. Shady trees were also planted near the rest houses
which induced the travellers and traders to stay there and to take rest.
Caretakers were also appointed to look after wayside chaultries. In a
watershed established with the wayside temple at Attoor, a village near
Tiruvattar in Kanyakumari district, a pandaram was appointed to
distribute water, pickles and salt to the wayfarers. The persons in charge
of the watersheds were provided with an allowance of paddy for their

79. Ibid., Vol.V. No. 42.
In addition, the maths and the spacious mandapas of the temples also served as rest houses for the pilgrims and other visitors belonging to different communities. Etymologically, math refers to a place of residence for an order of Hindu monks. In the Varadarajaperumal temple at Kanchi, the Ramanujakuda served as the rest house with free boarding and lodging facilities. Moreover, in the time of natural calamities, internal disorder, foreign penetration and even during political evolutions, the temples not only offered protection but asylum to the various people from far and near. During their stay, they ignored the caste restrictions and other social taboos and mingled together freely which enabled them to integrate socially.

There are many famous temples in Tamil Nadu right from the ancient time and many of which were sung by the Nayanmars like Appar, Thirugnanasambandar and Sundarar. Temples remained centre of cultural activities of the people. Ruling class as well as people contributed a lot for active role of the temples. Kings donated lands for performing pujas, rituals and festivals. People used to go to the temple to worship God. The Temple was the abode of God. Rituals, festivals etc. are celebrated by the temple. People actively took part in them and the temple has much impact on the socio-cultural life of the people. Temples remained the centre of music and dance.