CHAPTER 11

Legends and the Nine Sivalayams
CHAPTER - II

LEGENDS AND THE NINE SIVALAYAMS

From the days of yore a lot of legends had accumulated about the nine Sivalayams. When the temples gradually came to be widely known, the legends also increased. The Sthalapuranas of these temples tell about the origin of the legends and greatness of the temples. They are mostly written in Tamil. They are about some personages and historical events.

The origin of the nine Siva temples itself is based on legends. Agasthiar offered his blessings to his principal disciple Saint Romasar, and told his desire that lord Siva to be worshipped in the serial line of nine planets. God delivered nine lotus flowers in the vana Theertham, the starting point of River Thamirabarani. The flowers floated on the river. If a flower stopped at a particular place, lord Siva’s idol and his consort, Parvathi were to be installed in that place. Siva and Sakthi idols were named as lord Kailasanathar and Sivakami Ammayar respectively. Saint Romasar installed nine Sivalingas, in nine places where the lotus flowers halted and thus nine Sivalingas were installed by the God in nine holy places. These places stand for the nine planets. Later on temples have been constructed. The nine temples are:
1. Papanasam (Sun)
2. Cheranmahadevi (Moon)
3. Kodaganallur (Mars)
4. Kunnathoor (The Moon in ascending node)
5. Murappanadu (Jupiter)
6. Srivaikuntam (Saturn)
7. Thenthirupperai (Mercury)
8. Rajapathi (The dragons in descending node)
9. Chernthapoomangalam (Venus)

Out of the Navakailasam, Papanasam, Cheranmahadevi and Kodaganallur are collectively called as upper Kailasams. Kunnathoor, Murappanadu and Srivaikuntam are jointly known as Middle Kailasams. Thenthirupperai, Rajapathi and Chernthapoomangalam are specifically described as lower Kailasams. Due to various saints’ penance Papanasam is popularly known as Yogapeedam, Courtallam as Bogapeedam and Sivasailam as Gnanapeedam.

The holy tree of Papanasam temple is Mukkala. It is considered that, out of the four vedas, rig, yajur, and sama vedas changed themselves as Mukkala tree and became the Thalavirutcham (holy tree) of this temple. According to legend, a Pandya king was in meditation and Saint Agasthiar

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appeared before him and surmised the king failed to respect him. Agasthiar cursed him and the king became an elephant. Similar to this event in details, another King Vidhyadaran became a crocodile owing to Naratham's curse. When the elephant put his foot in the water, the crocodile caught the leg of the elephant. Lord *Maha Vishnu* killed the crocodile. After that the crocodile and the elephant got back their original forms.²

Another legend is that, *Sundaran*; a Brahmin killed his father and mother who refused to give money for his antisocial activities. Later, he repented, reached Papanasam and worshipped the Lord and attained salvation.

Yet another legend talks about Arikuthan and his own sister, who were separated from one another. They roamed here and there. At last they met at Kasi and married without knowing the relationship. After that they wore only black dress and reached Papanasam and wore new white dress and worshipped lord *Siva* to remove their sin.

Saint Romasar reached Kailasa and requested lord *Siva* to offer blessings to the people of Cheranmahadevi. Due to his request only, lord *Siva* reached the southern banks of Thamirabarani.³ The history of this temple at Cheranmahadevi is furnished in the *Romasa Theertha Charukkam* of Nellaiappa Pillai's Tirunelveli Thalapuranam. (local legend) Kodaganallur is previously called as *Kodagakshetram* and

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². Dinamalar, Tamil Daily, dt. 3 October 1999.
Kodanur. *Karkodagan* was a snake that had fallen inside wild fire. Nalan, the emperor who was far away from his children and wife, was affected by Mars. Nalan helped the snake to escape from the wild fire. For that timely help, the snake helped Nalan a lot to regain his kingdom. After that *Karkodagan* had a great name and fame in that area. In this place, the legend of the snake had a link with the name of the place in which the third *Kailasam, Kodaganallur* is situated.4

*Kunnathoor, Keela Thiruvanathapuram, Mela Thiruvanathapuram* and *Vilakam* were jointly called as *Kunnathoor* on those days.5 The flora and fauna of Kunnathoor as per a legend attracted a Pandya king who was called Kunnathoor Maharaja. The king built a small palace at Kunnathoor. Near the palace, there was a small hill surrounded by a big pond. There was a mango tree in the hill area. The tree yielded only one mango fruit in a year. The king appointed a special watchman to look after the mango tree. He used to take the mango fruit. One time the mango fruit fell into the pond. A pregnant lady came to the pond to fetch water. The mango fruit got into her pitcher along with water, but she did not know. The king ordered a raid of all houses in the village in search of the fruit. The woman was arrested for the theft. But she explained how it had happened. But nobody believed it. She was hanged.

5. Thinathanthi, Tamil Daily, dt. 5 December 2004.

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She cursed that, except cows and women the entire village would be ruined. The cows offered milk voluntarily on the Sivalinga. The later rulers built the temple and the temple is considered as the fourth one of the Navakailasam.

At Murappanadu, the flow of the river Thamirabarani is from north to south, just like Ganges at Varanasi. Hence, Murappanadu is known as Kasikattam and the river is known as 'Dakshina Gangai'. The story of Nandi in the temple of Murappanadu is one of the finest examples of legends. The wife of a Chola king gave birth to a daughter with horse’s face. The king was very much worried. He performed a penance before lord Siva and took bath in the river along with his daughter and worshipped lord Kailasanathar at Murappanadu. Lord Siva ordered Nandi to absorb the face of the horse from the girl. Siva offered a fair face to the daughter of the king. From that day onwards, the Nandi has been having the face of the horse.

The legend relating to Thenthirupperai is somewhat different and interesting. A district collector entered the temple premises to quench his thirst and to take rest. He ordered the temple servants to pluck the tender coconuts from the temple trees. The people of that village told him that the tender coconuts belonged to God. The collector was angry and ordered

them to pluck the temple coconuts. The servant climbed up the tree and plucked the tender coconuts and put there in the garden area. The collector himself was surprised while taking the tender coconut, it was with three tusks.  

CRITICAL ESTIMATE OF THE LEGENDS

The legends connected with these temples do not constitute history in the accepted sense of the term. Nor can they be considered as idealised or exaggerated history. Products of imagination and not a reason, the legends are intended to appeal to faith. They are full of impossible events.

Therefore it may be seen rather useless to dissect such fanciful tales with the weapons of historical criticism. Nevertheless an examination of the sthalapuranas and other uncollected traditions serve a useful purpose. How and when these events of the stories happened, what element or truth, if at all is imbedded in the tangle of legends does not matter. What important matter they throw on the existing institutions and practices in the temples and finally how for the myths of these temples have influenced the traditions of other places are all quite interesting to study.

It is important to remember that, as in many other matters connected with the temples of South India, the features appearing in one temple profoundly influenced that of the neighbouring ones. The art of imitation is nowhere seen more operative than in the case of South Indian temples. Doubtless in the south it was about a couple of centuries ago that there appeared an infectious wave of enthusiasm for sthalapurana. An over-increasing care for ennobling every shrine by an alluring glorification of its past was then the order of the day. That care has continued during the past two centuries, and so far as the minor shrines are concerned ingenious brains are busy at the task even at present.

DEFECTS OF THE PURANIC ACCOUNTS

It is needless to say that even a superficial reader of the sthalapurana of these temples will be struck by its drawbacks. There appear several clear cases of anachronisms, contradictions and chronological inconsistencies. Moreover the basic structure of the legends embodied in the sthalapuranas appears to be an adaptation of the stories connected with other places of renown. The association of the legends of Nandi, the celebrated vahana (vehicle) of Siva with certain variations is observed in several temples.
What do these similarities in the legendary background of numerous shrines of South India indicate? Repetitions of conventional statements and beliefs seem to have operated in shaping the thought of the poets who have embodied puranic and legendary lore in their works. The consequent unreliability apart, the *sthalapuranas* are after misleading the student of history. Euphemism or the practice of attributing to myths a historical basis is clearly discernible. Confining our attention to Murappanadu, we find that the accounts of the visit of Chola king with his daughter are all instances of euphemism.