The Temple and the Mathas:

In medieval India the temple and the matha were two important institutions that played a prominent part in the religious life of the people. While the former stood as a symbolic expression of the religious impulse of the people, the latter was an institution that stood for the propagation of certain schools of thought and the imparting of religious education in the particular way which was agreeable to the founder.

The mediaeval temple was, from a religious point of view, a house of God. The management of the temple was in the hands of trustees who had the right to control the appointment and dismissal of the temple servants and administer the temple endowments and property: in short, they controlled the interests of the temple. There were many servants in the temple of whom prominent. Mention must be made of the general manager of the temple (koyilkelvi) and the temple accountant (koyilkanakku or olaielttu); there were also the general watchman (mey kaval or tirumeni kaval), superintendent of the stores (araikava), treasurer (pon bandaram), servants in charge of lighting (tiruvilak-kudi), the temple priest, the piper and the drummer and a host of other servants who had different duties in it. The Gods in the temple were considered to have the tastes of the men who worshipped them, and hence a large number of dancing girls were attached to the temples, and their duty was
to dance and sing before the Gods, not only at the time when offerings were made to them but also in the mornings and evenings. The Gods were said to have been very much delighted at their dances and hence dancing girls were called the devaradiyar (servants of God). The servants of the temple were remunerated either by grants of lands on terms of beneficial service to be rendered to the temples, or they were allowed a particular share of the income of the temples. Sometimes private individuals maintained these temple servants by making grants of land for their maintenance or endowing a specified money income.

The temples encouraged education to a large extent, for teachers were employed by them for the recitation of the Vedas, Puranas or some sectarian literature in shrines. According to a group of documents at Tirpati provision was made in A.D.1433 for the chanting of Veda in the temple by twenty-four Brahmans for which a part of the revenue from the village of Sittakkuttai was set apart. A record of A.D. 1534-35 registers the gift of land and a house to each of the two Vaisnava Brahmans who recited the Puranas known as Bhakti Sanjivini in the local temple at Narasingapuram. According to an epigraph of A.D. 1523 Visvesvara Sivacarya of the Biksamatha at Devikkapuram, the Kaikkla Mudalis and other trustees of the temple at Devikkapuram made a gift of land and a house in the devadana village Sorappundi to Vadamalaiyar, one of the pundits (vidvan) of Arruvanpadi. In S. 1477 the authorities of the temple at Tiruppudamarudur appointed a certain Ramanatha as the post of the temple conferring on him the title Marudavanakkavirayan and granted him certain
lands and a house tax-free. He had evidently to attend on the two days of the
(Ke)ttai festival and to compose some poems for the occasion. From the next
year he was daily granted food from the temple, and three years later he was
granted a ma of land.

The temples were the places where grants were made by the kings.
Mallikarjuna Maharaya made his grants while he was at headquarters in the
danamantapa in the Virupaksa temple at the capital. The Vijayanagara
sovereigns made grants when they visited many of the holy places in the
empire. Sometimes they had themselves crowned in the temples. Acyuta Raya
for instance had himself crowned along with his wife Varadamba in the temple
at Tirupati.

The inscriptions give a list of the centers of pilgrimage in the
Vijayanagara days. To mention only a few of them, they were Ahobalam,
Srikakulam, Kalahasti, Tirupati, Kanci, Tiruvannamalai, Cidambaram,
kumbakonam, Srirangam, Jambukesvaram and Anantasayanam; and there were
many others of lesser importance. Pilgrimages were made by the people
generally on foot, though the use of palanquins and hired horses was not
uncommon. The roads were provided with shady trees, for the convenience of
travelers.

The mathas of South India, like the monasteries of mediaeval Europe,
were very important religious institution that received the care of the state, and
were maintained by the wealth they possessed. They were each presided over
by a sanyasin who was invariably a cultured ecclesiastic whose duty was not
only the management and administration of the matha but also the
centrance of learning. There were generally many disciples in these
mathas who, if they were in Brahmanical institutions, studied the Vedas and the
other allied Sanskrit literature, and if they were in non-Brahmanical
institutions, studied the vernacular literature. Thus these mathas were primarily
educational institutions.

We meet with many such mathas in the Vijayanagara days. The first
among such was the Srngeri matha in the modern Mysore State. Originally
founded by Sri Sankara, the great Advaita teacher and philosopher, it appears
to have continued to be presided over by a regular line of pontiffs.

**Fairs and Festivals:**

An important phase of the religious life of a people is the celebration of
festivals in different parts of the year. Often these festivals which were
religious in significance gained pageantry and show more for spectacular effect
than for anything else.

One of such festivals that were celebrated in the Vijayanagara days was
the Mahanavami. Originally a festival for the propitiation of the goddesses
Durga, it gained great political significance in the Vijayanagara days. The
occasion was taken advantage of by the emperor to hold his court in public in
the space within the palace enclosures and it was witnessed by the people. On
each day of the festival that was held for nine days, the idol which was placed
in a prominent place in the plain was worshipped by the king, and during the
nights many buffaloes and sheep were killed and sacrificed to the deity. But
about the exact number sacrificed our authorities differ. Paes says that on the first day were sacrificed twenty-four buffaloes and one hundred and fifty sheep. But according to Nuniz on the first day were killed nine male buffaloes, nine sheep and nine goats and on each of the following days the number of the previous day was doubled. Paes, however says that fifty buffaloes and four thousand five hundred sheep were slaughtered on the last day. But the more attractive side of the festival lay in the display of many arts and feats on all the days of the festival. On each of the day the ‘lords’ of the empire made their salaam to the king. The women danced before the sovereign; and wrestling matches were held. During nights forces were lit and placed in the arena in such a way that the whole was as bright as day. Then there were introduced very graceful plays and contrivances. There were others “with battles of people on horseback.” Others came with casting nets, fishing and capturing men that were in the arena. They threw many rockets and “many different sorts of fires, also castles that burn and fling from themselves many bombs (tiros) and rockets.” There was later witnessed a procession of the triumphal cars which belonged to the “captains” in the order of their status, followed by many horses richly caparisoned with trappings and cloths of very fine stuff and led by the state horse, all of which were arranged in five or six lines before the king in the arena, and passed round by Brahmans, the chief of whom carried in his hand a bowl with a cocoanut, some rice and flowers and the rest carried each a pot of water. These over, a number of the younger maids of the palace covered with gold and pearls appeared in the arena each with a small gold vessel and a
lamp of oil burning in it and followed by many women with canes in their hands “tipped with gold” and with torches burning. The grand festival ended with a review of the military by the king which gave occasion for the ordinary people to witness a very grand spectacle. The military appeared in the best of its robes outside the city and the king conducted the review amidst scenes of great joy and exuberance among the assembled people. Paes who was an eye-witness to one of such reviews ends his description with the words: “Truly I was so carried out with myself that it seemed as if what I saw was a vision and that I was in a dream”.

Nicolo dei conti describes a festival lasting for nine days and gives some curious details. He says: “On the third, which lasts nine days, they set up in all the highways large beams, like the masts of small ships, to the upper part of which are attached pieces of very beautiful cloth of various kinds, interwoven with gold. On the summit of each of these beams is each day placed a man of pious aspect, dedicated to religion, capable of enduring all things with equanimity, who is to pray for the favour of God. These men are assailed by the people, who pelt them with oranges, lemons and other odoriferous fruits all of which they bear most patiently”.

Another festival which Conti noted was what he thought to be the New Year Day, which according to Domingo Paes fell on October 12 in the year in which he visited Vijayanagara. This was the Dipavali, commemorating the death of Narakasura at the hands of Visnu. Conti says that on that occasion males and females of all ages, having bathed in the rivers or the sea, clothed
themselves in new garments, and spent three entire days in singing, dancing, and feasting. Paes too describes it as an occasion when everyone put on new and handsome clothes and made great feasting, and all captains gave their men handsome clothes, “each one having his own colour and device.” It was a new moon day, and Paes speaking about how the year was computed says: “They begin the year I this month with the new moon and they count the months always from moon to moon.”

The Karttigai festival was celebrated in honour of the death of Bali at the hands of Visnu in the person of Vamana. Conti who saw the festival describes it as follows: “they fix up within their temple and on the outside of their roofs, an innumerable number of lamps of oil of susimanni which are night.”

The festivals in the temple were generally concluded by a car festival. Many of the foreign travelers have given descriptions of it. But two of them, Nicolo dei Conti and Linschoten, give certain interesting details about it, which, however, look incredible. The former describes the car festival he saw as follows: “In Bizengalia also, at a certain time of the year, their idol is carried through the city, placed between two chariots, in which are young women richly adorned, who sing hymns to the god, and accompanied by a great concourse of people. Many, carried away by the fervour of their faith, cast themselves on the ground before the wheels, in order that they may be crushed to death, a mode of death which they say is very acceptable to their god. Others, making an incision in their side, and inserting a rope thus through their
body, hang themselves to the chariot by way of ornament and thus suspended
and half dead accompany their idol. This kind of sacrifice they consider the
best and most acceptable of all". The latter says that while the car was being
dragged there were a few who made certain sacrifices to the god. He observes:
“There are some of them, that out of the great Zeale and pure devotion doe cut
pieces of flesh out of their bodies and throw them down before the pagode:
others lay themselves under the wheels of the Cart, and let the Cart runne over
them, whereby they are all crushed to pieces and pressed to death, and they that
thus die, are accounted for holy and devout martyrs and from that time
forwards are kept and preserved for great and holy reliques, besides a thousand
other such like beastly superstitions”. But though the accounts of both are too
vivid to be dismissed as untrustworthy, yet it is difficult to believe them.

Sometimes car festivals were conducted for a number of days together.
According to a record of A.D. 1562 a grant was made for conducting a car
festival for fifteen days. In 1495 another grant was made for the celebration of
the car festival for nine days.

The floating festival was another which concluded a long one. A record
of A.D. 1606 mentions it.

The spring festival celebrated in honour of Kama was also conducted
annually. A number of inscriptions refer to such a festival. Krishnadeva Raya is
described in one such as one “who every year performed a sacrifice to (Kama)
the lord of the golden festival of spring”.
The Holi concluded this festival in the temples of Kama or Cupid. Nicolo dei Conti who witnessed one such describes it as follows: During the festival “they sprinkle all passersby, even the king and queen themselves, with saffron water. Placed for that purpose on the wayside. This is received by all with much laughter”\(^{12}\). Pietro della Valle who saw it at Surat observes: “March the fifteenth was the first day of the feast of the Indian Gentiles which they celebrate very solemnly at the entrance of the spring with dancing through the street, and casting orange water and red colours in jest one upon the other, with other festivities of songs and mummeries”\(^{13}\).

The occasion was taken advantage of for holding courts Krishnadeva Raya used to hear the poets assembled at the court for the spring festival\(^ {14}\). The Jambavatikalyanam, a drama written by the emperor-poet, was enacted before the people assembled to witness the Caitra (spring) festival of Sri Virupaksa\(^ {15}\).

From the inscriptions of the period we learn that there were a number of other minor festivals that were conducted during the different seasons of the year. They were for example the festivals on the first day of the month, the eleventh of the moon, the full moon, the new moon, Pancaparvams\(^ {16}\), Sivaratri\(^ {17}\), Makarasankranti\(^ {18}\), dasami\(^ {19}\), ekadasi, davadas\(^ {20}\), and so on.

**Village Gods and Deities:**

An account of the religious conditions of the period will not be complete without a mention of the village Gods and their festivals. The village deities were considered to be the guardian deities that protected the people of the respective villages from evil spirits, and were propitiated by the residents. As
Whitehead remarks, “the sole object of the worship of these village deities is to propitiate them and avert their wrath. There is no idea of praise and thanksgiving, no expression of gratitude or love, no desire for any spiritual or moral blessing. The one object is to get rid of cholera, small-pox.........The worship, therefore, in most of the villages takes place occasionally”\textsuperscript{21}.

An important feature of the festivals conducted in the temples of these village deities is the bloody sacrifices offered to them. Buffaloes and sheep were killed before them during nights, and offered to them. Paes says that in the city of Vijayanagara no sheep was to be killed anywhere except before the temple of one of these guardian deities. Sometimes human sacrifice too was made to appease them. Paes and Nuniz say that for the successful termination of the construction of the reservoir at Nagalapura “the heads of sixty men and of certain horses and buffaloes” were cut off. Nuniz says that they were Krishnadeva Raya’s prisoners and “deserved death”\textsuperscript{22}.

The Jogis or the travelling mendicants took some part in such temple offerings. They possessed nothing of their own and their dress consisted of “bands of moorish brass on which hang girdles of many coins which dangle on both sides.” Referring to them Barbosa says: “They carry a small horn or trumpet, on which they blow”\textsuperscript{23}. While describing a temple at “Darcha” (Dharwar) Paes says that the Jogi was present when beasts were slaughtered for the propitiation of the Gods and that as soon as the head of the sheep or goat was cut off he blew a horn as a signal that the idol received that sacrifice\textsuperscript{24}. 

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A feature of the worship of the village deities was what is known as the hook swinging. But the ceremony appears to have been different at different times. Nicolo dei Conti, as has been said earlier, says that the people made an incision in their side and hung themselves to the chariot by way of ornament. But Barbosa who saw the same ceremony a century later notes certain interesting details with regard to it. He says that hook swinging was performed by certain maids who had vowed to perform it if they were able to marry the person of their heart. When their desire was about to be accomplished they performed the ceremony. They hung themselves by two sharp iron hooks thrust into their loins. The hooks were attached to a water lift, and when it was raised they remained hanging from the lift with the blood running down their legs showing no sign of pain, but waving their dagger most joyfully all the while, and throwing limes at their respective husbands. In this way they were carried to the temple wherein was the idol to whom they had vowed such a sacrifice. They were later handed over to their respective husbands. The occasion was taken advantage of for making gifts to Brahmans and idols. But Pietro della Valle who was an eye-witness to the festival which was celebrated at Ikkeri in 1623 gives a different account of it. He says that on certain holy days the devout people were wont to hang themselves by the flesh upon hooks fastened to the top beam raised for the purpose and remain hanging for some time, while all the while blood was running down from their body. They also waved their sword and buckler in the air and sang verses in praise of their Gods. But this festival has disappeared now. Buchanan who visited Mysore in 1773 A.D. says
“that the ceremony was not performed before the great Gods, and that the southern Brahmans looked upon it as an abomination, fit only for the grovelling understanding of the vulgar”\(^2^8\). Fire-walking which is another feature of the worship of the village deities must have been prevalent, but is now fast disappearing.

Another interesting custom of certain classes of people in the Karnataka districts was the amputation of the last joints of two fingers (little finger and the ring finger) of the wives of the farmers in honour of Kalabhairava. The classes of cultivators who observed this custom were known as ‘finger giving classes.’

“There was till recently. It appears, a regular establishment in the temple for carrying on the amputation—a goldsmith for cutting off the finger and others for dressing the wound, and for kneading the finger and holding it so that no blood might be shed at the time. The devotees had also to pay certain fixed proportions among the arcak and other servants of the temple as well as among the ayagars of the village such as the Shanbog, patel, goldsmith, barber, etc. They had moreover to bring a fixed quantity of rice per head. An inscription of about the fourteenth century fixes the proportions in which this rice (viral arisi) was to be provided among the goldsmiths and others”\(^2^9\).

A popular phase of the religion prevalent in the Vijayanagara days as it still is was the worship of the Nagas (snakes). Virupaksa himself was considered to be the Lord of the Nagas. The Vijayanagara sovereigns worshipped the Nagas and considered Siva as Naganatha, the lord of the Nagas. Their queens set up nagakkals in the temples, which they attended, and also
special female Naga deities. Childless women used to vow to instal a nagakkal (snake stone), nagapratisthai, if they were blessed with children. The nagakkal was given life (pranapratisthai) by the recitation of certain mantras and installed under the shade of a pipal or margosa tree, preferably under a pipal tree. Such Nagas and Nagis were worshipped on a large scale in the Vijayanagara days. Similarly cows were held in great veneration.

Tree worship was also prevalent. The pipal and the margosa trees were the objects of great veneration and worship. They were married according to Brahmanical rites. An epigraph of A.D. 1358 records that a particular individual performed the upanayanam of the pipal trees planted at the four corners of the tank at Aruvanahalli.
References:

2. Major, *History of India*, p.28
3. *Ibid*
5. Major, *op.cit.*, p.28
6. *Ibid*
7. Purchas, *His Pilgrims*, p.274
15. Nicola dei Conti’s, *Travels of Nicola dei Conti’s*, p.122-23
17. *Ibid*, p.142
18. *Ibid*, p. 130
26. Major, *op.cit.*, p.28
27. Barbosa Duarte, *op.cit.*, p.220
28. Nicola dei Conti’s, *op.cit.*, p.259
29. *Journey Through Malabar*, p.440
32. Longhurst, *Hampi Ruins*, p.28-31