Chapter-I

INTRODUCTION

Religious studies occupy a prominent place in the cultural history of India. Religion, the pattern of belief and practice through which men communicate with or hope to gain experience of that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experiences. Typically it focuses on an ultimate or absolute thought of some one who believes as god. Even during the ancient past, there existed a variety of primitive religions called Totemism, Magic, Ancestor worship and the like and human beings associated themselves with some primitive religions. Fear and superstition are the basic ideas that controlled the entire activities of the primitive religions. In course of time, due to the advancement of human thought, higher religions came into existence, in which faith played the central role. India witnessed the birth of great religious sects which collectively called Hinduism.

Hinduism with its ethno-geographical connotation denoted the religious, philosophical and cultural traditions of India. Unlike other-religions, Hinduism does not have a single or common historical founder. It has no central authority to rule on the questions of religious matters. It is also formed of diverse traditions and spread over a large territory marked by significant ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity. The cultural and ethnic diversity of the
adherents of Hinduism resulted in an enormous variety of traditions. Hinduism is therefore the most complex of all the living religions in the world. Despite its complexity, Hinduism is one of the oldest major religions of the world. Demographically it is the world’s third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Majority of them live in India with an negligible percentage of population in other countries.

Hinduism consists of three principal gods called Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer. These gods figure in the Sanskrit religious texts. Besides, there are number of other gods and goddesses. There is a rural or folk form of the Hindu religion and there in people worship their own village centered gods, called *gramadevatas*. Though there are several sects within Hinduism, Saivism and Vaishnavism are the two major divisions of Hinduism. They became dominant due to a large following among different sections of the society and royal patronage. Most urban Hindus follow one of these two divisions. While Saivism regards Shiva as the ultimate deity, Vaishnavism regards Vishnu or his avatars (incarnations) such as Rama and Krishna as supreme gods.

Saivism is a religious sect, accepting Shiva as God-head. According to Sir. John Marshall, “Saivism is the most ancient living faith in the world”. In India people have continued the worship of Shiva uninterrupted. It was, and
still is, a Pan-Indian religion. The twelve *Jyotirlingas* situated at different centres from Kashmir to Rameshwaram stand to prove its wide-spread existence. All other states, too, have their own centres of Saivism. South India is known for its towering temples. People from south trekking to the Himalayas to visit the Kedarnath temple at Kedarnath and pilgrims from the north, visits South India for the glimpse of Sri Ramanathaswamy temple at Rameshwaram. Both of them speak in volumes of the faith and distribution of the cult throughout the length and breadth of the country.

The cult of Shiva was known to the ancient Tamils as evidenced by the Sangam classics. The development of Saiva sect and its philosophy in the Medieval Tamil country had their own socio-cultural background. Infact, the early Medieval Tamil country (600-1000 C.E) witnessed the new ideas and institutions in the field of religion. It had been pointed out that the revival of Brahmanism in the north during the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. penetrated to the extreme south and the rise of the Brahmanical sects of Saivism and Vaishnavism were as equal to it.

The revivalism in the Tamil country is to be viewed in the context of religious conflicts and the developments sequel to them between the 7th and the 9th centuries C.E. Owing to the persistent rivalry between the Brahmanical *Saiva* and *Vaishnava* sects on the one hand and the heretical sects of Jainism
and Buddhism on the other, the period between the 7th and the 9th centuries C.E. witnessed a significant socio-religious drift. There was the revival of patronage to Brahmins and their settlements in the Tamil country, not through Vedic religion but mainly through Puranic religion.  

The Brahmanical sects met successfully, the challenges offered by the Jains and the Buddhists. The growing awareness of the need to re-organize their systems resulted in the large scale construction of temples and allied institutions. The erection of temple was more or less a sequel to the above transformation. This process which commenced about the 7th century C.E., coinciding with the popularisation of the Bhakti cult, grew stronger in the subsequent centuries and reached the peak during the Chola period. The Bhakti concept represented the ideology and the temple provided the organisational basis.

The process of acculturation and assimilation were instrumental in making Tamil Saivism cult into a Saiva sect in this period. It was a sequel to the popularisation of the Puranic ore through the concept of Bhakti. This is very much represented by Tevaram texts. Thirunavukkarasar and Thirugnanasambandar made the spread of Saivism into a mass movement through Bhakti means.

A section of the Saiva Brahmins known as Adi Saivas realised the tradition of Tamil language and the antiquity of Shiva worship. They respected
Tamil traditions alongside the Vedic tradition. They believed that the Agamas too were sacred as they had been actually propounded by Lord Shiva himself as against the rejection of this idea by the Smartas. They believed in accepting the slowly evolving integration of northern and Tamil cults and Tamil must be given as much importance as Sanskrit. As a sequel to this, they had taken over the priesthood of the Shiva temples. Thirugnanasambandar joined with Thirunavukkarasar in carrying the message of Shiva to one and all and wanted it to be a movement of the Tamils. The development of Bhakti based Saivism was gradual and reached its high water mark in the 9th and the 10th century C.E., and all religious activities were centered around Puranic religion and Agamic based worship.

The rejuvenation of Saivism with new dimensions in the Pallava period made the Tamil Saivism into a new Saiva sect. The Nayanmar’s role through Bhakti was very great in this regard. The role of Karaikkal Ammaiayar, Mangayarkkarasi and other Saiva women devotees like Thilagavathi Ammaiayar, the wife of Kugilikkalaya Nayanmar in fostering Bhakti Saivism can be hard exaggerated. The concept of Saiva Bhakti was very much represented by the Tevaram texts and the temples. The Saivism also cropped up in this period as a by product of the Bhakti Movement. The philosophical base for Saivism, a contextual necessity in the light of religious rivalry, gradually began to take its root concomitant with the revival of Saivism in this period.
The principles of *Saiva Siddhanta* would be traceable in the first Seven *Tirumurais* wherein Thirugnanasambandar, Thirunavukkarasar and Sundaramurthi extol the Lord Shiva and his connections with the *Agamas*. *Saiva Siddhanta* conceiving out of the *Agamic* tradition was very much represented by *Tirumanñiram* (which preserve the quintessence of the *Saiva Agamas*). Saivism and its philosophy found very great patronage in the hands of the Pallavas. The temple movement under the Pallava rulers provided the excellent institutional basis for the growth of *Bhakti* ideology.\(^{18}\) The concept of *Bhakti* had been one of the legitimising instruments for the entire building activity of the Pallavas. The high watermark in this regard was reached when Narasimha II (Rajasimha) built excellent temples for Lord Shiva.\(^{19}\)

The age of the Cholas was the period of fulfilment for the *Bhakti* based Saivism. Nambiar Nambi, the first hagiographer of the period, played a significant role in the recovery of the Tamil hymns and setting it to Tamil music. Astonishingly enough only a woman, a *virali* of the family of a low caste helped Nambi to set the hymns to music. This period witnessed the cropping of number of temples dedicated to Lord Shiva.\(^{20}\)

The 13\(^{th}\) century C.E. was a landmark in the history of *Bhakti* based Saivism when it gained a new dimension both from the institutional and philosophical points of view. The Tamil *Saiva* religion, the development of
which coincided with the period of the *Saiva Siddhanta* Movement, provided the institutional basis for the *Saiva Siddhanta* Philosophy (the philosophical system of the Tamils based on the *Saiva Agamas, Upanishads, Tirumurais* and *Meykanta Sastras*).\(^{21}\)

Saivism and *Saiva Siddhanta*, in the 16\(^{th}\) and 17\(^{th}\) centuries, C.E. was championed by the non-Brahmin heads of *Saiva Adheenams* of Thanjavur district. These *Adheenams* voiced the *Saiva Siddhanta* of the south. They popularised the same against Sanskrit which was conspicuous in the Vijayanagar times and after. The late 19\(^{th}\) century and the early 20\(^{th}\) century C.E. witnessed the revival of *Saiva Siddhanta* Philosophy concomitantly with the development of Tamil renaissance.\(^{22}\) The spiritual and religious awakening of Tamil Nadu had its own socio-cultural ethos. The triumph of Saivism lies in its catholicity and liberal traditions. The medieval traditions of Saivism had their impact on society.

Temples were generally erected for the worship of the common people. They were constructed only according to *Agamas*. According to the canons of *Agama* tradition, a temple should have certain architectural and spiritual features such as tower, *balipeedam*, flag post, *sabhas*, courtyards, sanctum, chariot, *vahana*, holy tanks, holy trees, pujas and festivals. Shrines were raised under trees in the beginning- *balipeedam* (place of sacrifice) under a tree was
worshipped as god.\textsuperscript{23} The \textit{balipeedam} was decorated with paintings for worship. Soon it was replaced by bricks. Thus temples were built for the worship of god.

Temple are constructed neither to prove the existence of god nor to propagate him. But they are mainly established to regulate man in the spiritual field of realizing god. They are built to remind man of god and of his love. Ancient temples looked like fortified citadels of kings because they gave protection to the people during the time of war. They became centres of learning. Pupils were trained in theology and were offered spiritual instruction.\textsuperscript{24} Temples stand today as the symbols of Indian culture and heritage.

Hundreds of Shiva temples of historic fame are found in Tamil Nadu. Lord Shiva is generally worshipped in the form of \textit{Phallus (Linga)} fixed on a pedestal. The Lord Nataraja form of Lord Shiva is known to be the first of twenty five ones of Lord Shiva.\textsuperscript{25} i.e., Nataraja, Chandrasekhara, Umapahesa, Rishabharuta, Kalyanasundara, Bhikshatana, Kamari, Kalari, Tripurari, Jalantarari, Mantankari, Virabhadra, Haryartha, Ardhanaarishwara, Kirata, Kankala, Sandesanugraha, Nilakantha, Chakkaraprata, Gajamukhanugraha, Somaskanda, Ekapala, Sukhasana, Dakshinamurti and Lingotbhava. Hence, it is derived from the \textit{Agamas} that Lord Shiva manifests himself in the form of Nataraja. He is addressed as \textit{Adavallan}, (Best dance performer) \textit{Kuttaperuman, Ambalavanavan, Sabhapathi, Natesar, Niruthan}. 
Lord Nataraja is a unique concept, among the noblest symbolisms of the supreme power. The most common images show him with four arms and flying locks, dancing on a dwarf (a symbol of human ignorance) and encircled by a ring of flames.\textsuperscript{26} The Nataraja sculpture shows Lord Shiva as the source of all movements within the cosmos, represented by the loop of flames. The purpose of dance is to release human from illusion, the place where the god performs the dance is believed to lie both at the centre of the universe and within the human heart.\textsuperscript{27} In the most consumable realization by the artists of the profound symbolism of the dance, there is poise, rhythm and balance that can only be compared with that of Buddha images of Saranath and the monumental Mahesamurti of Elephanta. But while the Buddha image symbolizes the 'Pure being', Lord Nataraja symbolizes the 'Becoming', as Coomarasamy puts it. Becoming connotes eternal flux which is in the dance itself.\textsuperscript{28}

Dynamic Movement or eternal flux is thus admirably integrated with accentless, pensionless inner rest and calmness. To maintain a fixed artistic form at high level, with relatively full creative urge, through almost a millennium of changing circumstances, is indeed a phenomenon in the history of progress, which is worth consideration. Presumably, it presupposed a life and society that maintained their original faith and conviction in certain forms and feelings, emotions and ways of life, irrespective of the changing social and economic-pattern into which their lives were set.\textsuperscript{29} But it is more surprising so
far as South India, Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam concerned, since while contemporary stone sculptures show signs of classification and exhaustion, the metal images are wrought, not mechanically but with considerable amount of creative vigour and skill.\textsuperscript{30}

Dance halls or assemblies or stages (Sabhas) are the places where the Lord Nataraja performs his dance. The Lord functions in five aspects by dancing in the Five Divine Sabhas. The five functions are Creation, Destruction, Grace, Dissolution and Blessing. According to Hindu Philosophy the functions of the world will stop to exist if the dance of the Lord Nataraja would cease.\textsuperscript{31}

There are numerous Shiva temples in Tamil Nadu. Among these Shiva temples, Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam are very revered and they are known for the Five Divine Sabhas.\textsuperscript{32} The name of the Five Divine Sabhas are

- Chidambaram - Kanaka Sabha (the Hall of Gold)
- Madurai - Velli Sabha (the Hall of Silver)
- Thiruvalangadu - Rathina Sabha (the Hall of Rubies)
- Tirunelveli - Thamira Sabha (the Hall of Copper)
- Courtallam - Chithira Sabha (the Hall of Portraits)
Objectives of the Study

- To know the origin and development of Lord Nataraja cult in Tamil Nadu.
- To study the historical background of the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja.
- To examine the architectural features of the Five Divine Sabhas.
- To make a detailed study of the Lord Nataraja sculptures of the Five Divine Sabhas.
- To reflect briefly on the administrative set up of the Five Divine Sabhas and other social orientations.
- To describe the system of daily pujas, monthly and annual festivals and other important celebrations of the Five Divine Sabhas.
- To assess the impact of Lord Nataraja cult on Tamil Nadu in a detailed manner.

Hypotheses

The hypotheses for verification may be described in the following terms that are crucial to understand the development of Nataraja cult in Tamil Nadu. The study hopes to evaluate the different kinds of source materials that help to construct the history of the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja in Tamil Nadu.
It is to be tested, whether Shiva traditions have had any impact in the cult orientation of the temples.

**Review of Literature**

Inscription lends a helping hand in tracing the history of temples. They take one to the religious and historical life of the people of those days. The texts of the inscriptions have been published by the Archaeological Department, Government of India. There are nearly 214 Inscriptions on Chidambaram Natarajar temple, 52 Inscriptions on Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, 43 Inscriptions on Thiruvalangadu Vataranyeswarar temple, 46 Inscriptions on Tirunelveli Nellaiyappar temple and 6 Inscriptions on Courtallam Kutralananatham temple, found in the Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy. These inscriptions are useful to reconstruct the history of Five Divine Sabhas and their administration.

*A Topographical List of the Inscriptions of the Madras Presidency* by V. Rangacharya and *A Topographical List of Inscriptions in the Tamil Nadu and Kerala States* by T.V. Mahalingam supply additional information about these temples. *South Indian Temple Inscriptions* by T.N. Subramaniam has added additional information regarding this.

Apart from the inscriptions, literatures in Tamil which are quasi-historical or purely religious come in handy to reclaim the history of the Five
Divine Sabhas. *Tevaram*, hymns of Tirugnanasambandar, Tirunavukkarasar and Sundarar are indispensable sources which help to reconstruct the religious history of Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli, and Courtallam. The *Tevaram* hymns, the *Saiva* hagiology and *Periyapuranam* speak of Chidambaram as *Thillaivanam*, Madurai as *Kadambavanam*, Thiruvalangadu as *Vataranyam*, Tirunelveli as *Venuvanam* and Courtallam as *Alavanam*. They give a vivid account in eulogistic terms of the scenic beauty of the above said places.

C. Sivaramamurthi’s *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* throws a light about Lord Nataraja as the Lord of Dance and has furnished the development of Nataraja cult. Sivapriya’s *Pancha Sabhai Thiruthalangal* (Tamil) gives vivid description about the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja located at Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam. David Dean Shulman’s *Tamil Temple Myths* gives a detailed picture of Lord Shiva’s shrines, myths and dance. These information help to describe all the aspects of Lord Shiva. Kamil V. Zvelebil’s, *Ananda-Tandava of Shiva-Sadananda Murti* gives an outline of the development of Lord Nataraja icon and also gives references to the development of the concept of *Atavallan, Kuttaperumanatikal* through the South Indian textual and iconographic tradition.

Projesh Banerji’s, *Nataraja, the Dancing God* has furnished the legendary history of Lord Nataraja through different theories like scientific oriental etc. There are indispensable sources to know the art, dharma and Nataraja concept in detail. K.C. Kamaliah’s *Vision of the Sacred Dance* provides general information about the conception and evolution of Lord Nataraja and also gives references about the multi-faceted study of Lord Nataraja. Ananda Coomaraswamy’s *The Dance of Shiva* gives an account of the dance forms of Lord Shiva. M.Krishnasastri’s, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses* describes different aspect of Lord Shiva in detail.
K. Vellaivaranan’s, *Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam* all these books deal with the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja.

Authoritative works on *Arts and Architecture of South Indian temple* such as Indian Architecture by Percy Brown, Early *Chola Architecture and Sculpture* by Douglas Barrett and his another work *Early Chola Bronzes* throw light on the important aspects of Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam temples. *South Indian Bronzes* by O.C. Ganguly, T.A. Gopinatha Rao’s *Elements of Hindu Iconography* contain some useful references to these temples. P.V. Jagadisa Ayyer’s *South Indian Shrines* asserts the historical importance of shrines, architectural features, festivals and specialities of the Shiva temples of Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam.

Saskia Kersenboom’s article on “Ananda Tandava: The Dance of Siva,” *Reconsidered*, deals with Shiva’s dance. Rajukalidas’s article on “Antiquity of Tillai-Cittira Kutam”, *South Asian Studies*, elaborately deals with the Lord Nataraja’s *Ponnambalam* (Golden Sabha) through the antiquities. Rajukalidas’s another article on “Urdhava Tandavam in the Art of South India”, *East and West*, gives a detailed account of Lord Nataraja’s Rathina Sabha located at Thiruvalangadu and also furnishes the Urdhava Tandavam. (Dance form of Lord Shiva). K.V. Sundarajan’s “The Matrix of South Indian Architecture”,
"Journal of Indian History" and A. Veluswamy’s, “Evolution of Gopura in Temple Architecture of Tamil Nadu”, *Journal of Tamil Studies*, have furnished the South Indian architecture especially the Five Divine Sabhas. A.N. Perumal’s, “Art of Dance in the Temples of Tamil Nadu Epigraphical Evidence”, *Journal of the Epigraphical Society of India*, present the art of dance proved by the Epigraphical sources.

This researcher relied heavily on works such as Divine Sabhas and its significance through personal interviews with temple authorities and by consulting the temple records and registers, the researcher collected details about the pujas and festivals of the temples and the administration of them. From all these, one can understand the details relating to the history of the Five Divine Sabhas. There is no comprehensive research work on the history, architecture, sculpture, pujas and festivals and the administrative history of the Five Divine Sabhas. Therefore, an attempt has been made here to study all the aspects of the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja in Tamil Nadu.

**Methodology**

This study attempts to bring out the philosophy of life especially Saivism in all human endeavours with philosophical perceptions. The search would be a better comprehension of the Saivaite philosophy of man in the universe. The period under the study of the numerous metal images of Lord Nataraja was
found in the Tamil country. “The Nataraja type is one of the great creations of Indian art”. Thus realizing the unity and simultaneity of the five activities: (Panchakritya) – Creation, Destruction, Grace, Dissolution and Blessing which the symbolism specifically designates. This research work is also done mainly based on field survey of the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Natraja in Tamil Nadu. The methodology adopted in this work is partly descriptive and partly analytic and interpretative. In the whole thesis, Tamil words are italised and their meanings are given in the glossary.

**Source Materials**

Normally the sources in historical research are brought under two broad heads, primary and secondary. They are also supported with the scholar’s direct field visit and additional information gathered through interviews. The primary sources consist of Inscriptions, Government Orders, Annual Reports, Proceedings, Souvenirs and Private discussion with Resource persons. Other Booklets, and Pamphlets dealing with Nataraja cults have been consulted for the study. Manuals, Gazetteers, Tamil Literary works and published works of different scholars, form the bulk of secondary source of information. They are helpful to understand Nataraja cult and the Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Natraja in Tamil Nadu.
Delimitation

This research work mainly focusses on Lord Nataraja and the spiritual manifestations of the Shiva temples, especially the Five Divine Sabhas over the centuries i.e., since the Sangam age.

Area of the Study

The research topic selected by the scholar is Five Divine Sabhas of Lord Nataraja in Tamil Nadu; The Five Divine Sabhas are located in Chidambaram, Madurai, Thiruvalangadu, Tirunelveli and Courtallam. Hence, the scholar has taken up for study the above said five places in this thesis.

Chapterization

- The thesis consists of nine chapters. The first or introductory chapter deals with Hinduism and the development of Saivism in Tamil Nadu. Different aspects of Lord Shiva, Lord Nataraja and Five Divine Sabhas are the general features of the study.

- The second chapter discusses the Origin and Development of the Lord Nataraja Cult in Tamil Nadu.

- The third chapter narrates the Historical Background of the Five Divine Sabhas.
❖ The fourth chapter provides information about the surviving architectural features of the Five Divine Sabhas.

❖ The fifth chapter throws light on Administration of the Five Divine Sabhas.

❖ The sixth chapter deals with Pujas and Festivals of the Five Divine Sabhas.

❖ The seventh chapter explains the Social Welfare Measures of the Five Divine Sabhas.

❖ The eighth chapter attempts to study the Impact of the Lord Nataraja Cult on Tamil Nadu.

❖ The last chapter summarises the whole study and gives suggestions for further research.
End Notes


