Chapter-VII

SOCIAL WELFARE MEASURES

This chapter discusses various social welfare activities undertaken by the temples of Five Divine Sabhas. Social welfare function is a function that ranks social status as less desirable, more desirable, or indifferent for every possible pair of social status. The professional field of social work has a dual purpose that of helping individuals familiar, groups and communities with specific problems to function effectively in society, social work encouraging the constructive involvement of society in caring for its members, social workers and the needy in obtaining food, shelter and other essential resources and services, social workers counsel and provide psychotherapy for individuals, families and groups they plan and coordinate social services for communities and groups and they participate in governmental decision making aimed at improving social conditions.¹

The South Indian temples true to the saying no temple, no village, (Koil Ilai Ooril Kudiyirukka Vendam) acted in the Medieval period of Tamil history as a centre of spiritual as well as secular activities of the general public living around them.² The temple, it is no exaggeration to say was indeed a symbol of the sedimentary experiment in the creation of a welfare state. It touched every
facet of local life, political, social, economic and religious. It provided proper
social environment and offered ample scope for self improvement.

A temple, as a public place of worship, tends to become an institution
with social, economic and political dimensions. Collective practice of religion
naturally involves professionals of various categories. The temple, for instance,
not only employs priests and their attendants, but architects, sculptors,
carpenters, smiths, musicians (pipers and drummers) and suppliers of several
articles. The temple is a means of gainful employment for numerous people in
the community.\textsuperscript{3}

The temple is also a big consumer in the locality; it buys not only the
articles necessary for daily worship (like flowers, fruits, sandalwood, oil, milk,
\textit{kungumam} and turmeric, camphor, fuel, plantain leaves, betel-leaves and nut)
but also the provision for the kitchen to supply the daily food offerings as part
of the worship ritual. If the temple is affluent, it must then have a well furnish
kitchen with are, adequate staff of cooks and servers, for traditionally the
temple is expected to feed the devotees, pilgrims, ascetics and poor people once
a day.\textsuperscript{4} A temple would usually have a kitchen and store-room attached to it,
and often a dining hall outside the temple proper but within the enclosure.

On occasions of festivals, it is customary that the whole village or the
community around, to dine in the temple food provided here is regarded as
blessed by divine grace (prasada) for it has first been offered to the presiding deity of the temple (as neivedya). Food in a temple is of course free, although the devotees may make some offering to the temple-funds, but not as payment for food received. The temple must have provision for such mass-feeding on occasions, which would involve hired services as well as voluntary service. This would call for elaborate economic organisation.

It is also a mechanism of social service in as much as the strangers and visitors to the village or town would have ready and free access to food for a limited number of days. This was expedient and welcome, especially for those who had no friends or relatives in the village or town they visit for whatever reason. In olden days there were no hotels or restaurants. This arrangement is prevalent in many temples even now. And it was usual for many temples to finance or assist free lodging facilities in the nature of choultries in close proximity to the temple.

The priests in the temple often catered to the boarding and lodging needs of the pilgrims and visitors, but in return to some small payment. They also functioned as guides for pilgrims who had special vows to discharge. The practice is current to this day in all important pilgrim centers. It was customary in the village or town to celebrate religio-social functions like marriage in the premises of the temple. The temple would this event. Not — only make.
Available to the parties a hall (*mandapa*), courtyard, but also other services necessary for the solemnization of the marriage, at minimal expenses. This was a great help for the poor folk. Many of the temples were well-known centers of learning, some of them universities (*mahaghatikasthana*), imparting education in the traditional or scriptural lore.

**Annadanam Scheme**

"Persons providing food are hailed as persons providing lives" - Thus insists and instructs *Purananooru*, the great Tamil classical literature of the Sangam Age that dates before 2,000 years. The above noble and novel scheme, was inaugurated by the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on 23.3.2002. This scheme was implemented in 63 temples in the first phase. After that, step by step this scheme was extended to 360 temples in seven stages. Now under the *Annadanam* Scheme, *Annadanam* is provided in 518 temples in Tamil Nadu. This scheme is receiving high praises from scholars, dignitaries, devotees, the public and by religious people.

Our religious savants and scholars have ever been stressing the significance of *Annadanam* since ancient times that the fact that persons providing *Annadanam* is the best of all gestures of donations. Knowing this and providing life, people from the common man to the millionaire are contributing this scheme. In the Commissioner's office, an account was opened in
Commissioner designation exclusive for the *Annadanam* scheme. A sum of Rs.3.27 crore was collected and deposited in the said account. From the surplus funds of the affluent temples, a sum of Rs.20.00 crore was deposited as a permanent investment exclusively for this scheme. Now the amount has accumulated as Rs. 35.10 crore.\(^{11}\)

The interest accrued from this source of fund will be distributed to the temples, which are needy for implementing the scheme. In all the 518 temples where *Annadanam* scheme has been implemented, *hundials* have been installed exclusively for this scheme. In all the temples implementing Annadanam scheme food is provided for the devotees after the *Uchikala puja*. Rice, *Sambar*, *Rasam*, *Buttermilk*, *Koonu*, *Poriyal*, Pickles, etc. are provided in *Annadanam*. Depending on the number of devotees visiting temples, 50 to 300 devotees are provided with *Annadanam* under this scheme in each temple.\(^{12}\)

Due to the lack of proper monitoring found recently there was a great fall in the number of beneficiaries and in the quality of food. After this Government took charge, Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa has ordered to ensure the number of beneficiaries and to improve the quality of food. She has also ordered to serve *Annadanam* with *Vadai* and *Payasam* on Sundays at temples having surplus funds. The Chief Minister has given new life to this scheme by instructing to extend the *Annadanam* scheme further for 106 temples.
Accordingly steps are being taken to carry out this scheme in a more effective manner. The temples like Meenakshi Sundaeswarar temple at Madurai, Vataranyeswarar temple at Thiruvalangadu, Nellaiyappar temple at Tirunelveli, Kutralanathar temple at Courtallam has benefited this scheme.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Karunai Illam}

\textit{Karunai Illam} is the name given to the orphanage being maintained by the \textit{Devasthanams} of Meenakshi Amman temple and Nellaiyappar temple. There are separated orphanages for boys and girls where in 100 boys and 75 girls are accommodated respectively in Madurai.\textsuperscript{14} Free accommodation, dress, food and education are provided to them by the Meenakshi Sundaeswarar temple Devasthanam. A new building was constructed by Nellaiyappar Temple Devasthanam, are providing free education, food, shelter and dress to poor children.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Joint Prayers}

To seek the blessings of the deities for the quick recovery of patients at the emergency wards of the Government hospital, Madurai joint prayers are conducted at 5.30 p.m. on every Fridays. This unique prayer were inaugurated on 8.11.2001 under the Chairmanship of Minister for Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment, P.C. Ramasamy in the presence of the HR & CE Secretary P.A. Ramiah IAS and other officials.\textsuperscript{16}
On every Friday morning, representatives from the temple would proceed to the government hospital and get a list of patients under emergency care, their names, *lagna*, star and in the evenings in the presence of city's dignitaries and doctors from the hospital, stanzas for cure of illnesses by *oduvar* moorthies and then the names of the patients would be read and joint prayers conducted. After that *archanas* would be performed in the name of patients in the sanctums of Goddess Meenakshi and Lord Sundareswarar. The following morning, priests would proceed to the hospital and hand over the *prasadam* individually to the patients and they are consoled.¹⁷

Moreover, patients at other hospitals and homes, who send their names, stars, *lagna* and addresses are despatched *prasadam* by post after *archana* in their names. This joint prayers system had won the appreciation of people from all over Tamil Nadu which is reflected in the numerous letters that the temple authorities receive daily.¹⁸ Those patients who wish to seek cure through this joint prayers could send their names and other details to the temple authorities, their names will be included in the joint prayers and *archanas* and the *prasadam* would be sent to them.

**Spiritual and Moral Education Classes**

In Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarer temple, spiritual and moral education classes are conducted for children every Sunday from 4.00 p.m. to
5 p.m. More than 35 children are benefitting from these classes. These classes were inaugurated by C. Durairaj, Minister for Local Administration on 23.3.2002 in Madurai. This scheme was also extended to the Nellaiyappar temple at Tirunelveli from 18.8.2002.\(^9\) There are about 35 children attending these classes.

**Free Marriage Scheme**

Free weddings are performed in Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, Madurai, Vataranyeswarar temple, Thiruvalangadu, Nellaiyappar temple, Tirunelveli and Kutralanathar temple, Courtallam for the benefit of Adi Dravidars, Adivasis and Backward Classes. Under this scheme the couple undergoing free weddings are gifted new clothes, *Thirumangalyam* and other presentation at a cost of Rs.3,000. 20 guests are also fed at temple's cost. On 17.2.2002, grand free weddings were conducted for 70 couples in Meenaksi Sundareswarar temple.\(^{20}\) On that day, the temple also bore the cost of the wedding of 18 couples in Nellaiyappar temple.\(^{21}\) Those availing this benefit should be of marriageable age and unmarried. Necessary documents should be brought from Village Administrative Officer and submitted at the office. Application forms for assistance under this scheme are available at the office of the temple. Further details could be obtained from the temple office.
Distribution of Sarees/Dhoties

In Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, Thiruvalangadu Vataranyeswarar temple, Tirunelveli Nellaiyappar temple and Courtallam Kutralanathar temple, cotton sarees and dhoties received as offerings. They are distributed to the elderly persons, destituates and widows on Independence day and Anna Memorial Day during the events of common feast held in those temples.\textsuperscript{22}

Birla Vishram

To enable pilgrims from outside areas and travellers to stay, two and three bedded rooms and air conditioned rooms are available at affordable rates at 'Birla Vishram' travellers lodge on behalf of the Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple. This lodge is situated near the entrance to the West Gopuram.\textsuperscript{23}

Refresher Training Course

For the Archakas, Bhattachariars and Oduvurs to do their work efficiently, the Refresher Course Scheme was started in the year 1991 and functioned effectively. Under this scheme, prominent temples have been selected in each Assistant Commissioner division from the year 2002 and so far 488 persons are benefited by this scheme.\textsuperscript{24}
Appointment of Nagaswara Artists

For playing Nagaswaram during the time of festivals and pujas at financially poor temples which are ancient and praised by Alwars and Nayanmars in their hymns, a corpus of Rs. 1 crore has been deposited for enabling payment for musicians recruited for playing Nagaswaram, Thavil and Thaala instruments at a monthly salary of Rs.1500/-, Rs.1000/- and Rs.750/- respectively.25

Welfare Schemes for Temple Employees

Different categories of employees are working in temples under the control of the H.R.&.C.E. Department. The welfare schemes available for temple employees are listed below.26

- Employees Provident Fund Scheme.
- Departmental Pension Scheme.
- Family Benefit Fund Scheme.
- Special Provident Fund and Gratuity Scheme.
- Temple Employees Welfare Fund Scheme.
- Pension Scheme for Archakar, Oduvar, Vedhaprayanan, Arayars, Divya Prabhandam reciters and musicians.
• Advance for Marriage, Festival and for purchase of Vehicles.

• Appointment on Compassionate Grounds.

• Kudamuzhukku Incentive.

• Additional Incentive for Annual Festivals.

• Pongal Ex-gratia Payment.

• Financial Assistance for the Higher Education of the Children of the Temple Employees.

• Providing Uniforms and Identity Cards for the Temple Employees.

• Computer Training for Temple Employees.

• Providing Free Bicycles for the Archakas / Poosaris of the Temples where Oru Kala Pooja is Performed.

The employees like Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple, Thiruvalangadu Vataranyeswarar temple, Tirunelveli Nellaiyappar temple, Courtallam Kutralanathar temple are benefited the above said welfare schemes.

**Vataranyeswarar temple Hospital**

The main problem in the sphere of health services has been the shortage of medical personnel and the inadequacy of medical and health services. In Thiruvalangadu areas, the Vataranyeswarar temple Trust has been evolving schemes to meet the requirements of the people to the maximum extent
possible. The Vataranyeswarar temple administration founded an allopathic hospital in 1970. There are ten beds in the hospital. The hospital provides free treatment and medicines. The temple employees are benefitted from the hospital. First Aid centre is also functioned during festival times.²⁷

**Siddha Dispensary at Courtallam**

The indigenous system of medicines were in vogue in Courtallam from the early times. The indigenous medical practitioners thrived under royal patronage and by ground of tax free lands for their services. Special treatments for poisons or infections of various kinds were given in Courtallam in Siddha System by eminent *Vaidyas*. Siddha medicine was fairly wide spread throughout the Courtallam area and the physicians had an exalted status in the society. They also had a fair knowledge of medicinal shrub and herbs growing around the forest tracks. The Siddha dispensary of Kutralanathar temple Trust was founded in 1970.²⁸ This dispensary cures all kinds of diseases and free treatments are given to all.

**Trusts in Chidambaram Nataraja Temple**

The trusts like Adur Mangalam Pillai Trust, Rathnasapapathi Pillai Trust, V.S Trust, Cit Sabha Mangalam Trust, Vidhyasala Trust, Pandyanayagam Trust, Dharumapuram Adhinam Trust, Indhu Nadar Uravinmurai Trust and Ananda Natarajamurthi Trust are functioned in grand manner in Chidambaram.
These trustees have deposited a huge amount on their respective trusts. The amount is utilized for the daily pujas, and on special occasions, free meals scheme, etc.²⁹

Other Activities

In order to quench the thirst of devotees coming to the Natarajar temple at Chidambaram, water tanks had been set up at the entrance to each tower at a cost of Rs.2.50 lakhs with funds from MLA's Constituency Development and potable protected water is made available to them.³⁰ In order to disseminate spiritual knowledge to devotees a library with 1750 volumes is functioning in Thiruvalangadu.³¹ On important days discourses are delivered by spiritual leaders and college professors in the temple and satellite temples to promote spiritual thinking among the devotees. Saiva religious training classes, spiritual seminars, religious reawakening classes are conducted every year by the Nellaiyappar temple.³²

To provide an insight into the importance of the temple, to understand the concept easily, to learn the history of the temple, audio and video cassettes as well as a tourist map of the temples of Madurai district, Thiruvilayadal Puranam, Thiruvadhavoor Sthalapuram, Explanation of Hinduism, Meenakshiammai Pillai Thamizh, Angayarkanni Anupoodhi, The Great Temple of Madurai, Madurai Through Ages and other works and pictures of Swamy
and Amman are available at the Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple book stall.\textsuperscript{33}

Under the auspices of the temple administration, a girls higher secondary school called Arulmighu Meenakshi Sundareswarar Girls Higher Secondary School is being run near Theppakulam, Madurai, Since 7.6.1963. There are 1,266 students on roll here with a staff of 46, including the head mistress and other employees. The temple is running a mercy home where poor students are being provided lodging, food, clothing, text books, notes and other requirements. At present there are 46 girls in the home.\textsuperscript{34}

In order to offer archana in Tamil, books for this purpose obtained from the office of Madurai Joint Commissioner had been distributed to all priests in the temple and now archana is being conducted in Tamil. There are 18 guides authorised by the temple administration to guide devotees from other states and foreign countries. On the first day of every Tamil month, special prayers with abhishekas are offered at the shrine of Sangam poets on the second corridor of the Swami Sannidhi. Special prayers are also conducted on the birth star days of the temple Adiyars and 63 Saints.\textsuperscript{35}

Annadanam Scheme and Karunai Illam are the best social measures carried out by the temples. Joint prayers for the sick to recover are a good activity of the temples. Moral education classes are really a boon to modern
boys and girls those who are addicted to cinema and T.V. Free marriage scheme and welfare schemes for temple employees are praiseworthy. Like Christians, Hindu temples have also started hospitals to eradicate diseases is a laudable one.
End Notes


4. Ibid., p. 45.

5. Ibid., p. 46.


8. Ibid., p. 60.


13. Ibid., p.67.


17. Ibid., p. 8.


