CHAPTER II
ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF ŚAIVA MATHAS IN THE TAMIL COUNTRY

A study of monastic orders and institutions of various religious systems constitutes one of the interesting chapters in the religious and cultural history of India. In this chapter an attempt is made to trace the origin and spread of Śaiva mathas in the Tamil country.

MONACHISM TO MONASTICISM

Asceticism is one of the important contributions of ancient Indian culture. In fact, India is the homeland of monachism and ascetic practices. The practice of asceticism is known to have existed in the early Vedic society. Some scholars even infer the existence of asceticism among the non-Vedic people of the Indus Valley. It continued and flourished in the post Vedic period i.e., 6th century B.C. The ascetics, the homeless men of religion, grouped themselves into a corporate community, the members of which were designated variously
as **sannyāsin** (one who renounced home and worldly life), **bhikkhu** (a mendicant living on alms) and **śramaṇa** (a toiler of spiritual life). The ascetic of Brāhmaṇical fold was known as **sannyāsin**, of Buddhist religion as **bhikkhu** and **śramaṇa** and, of Jaina religion as **yati**. They developed their own body of practices, and disciplinary and organisational rules and regulations.6

When ascetics grouped themselves into a community under rules of discipline for the purpose of spiritual realization, there developed the institution of **coenobium** (collective living of ascetics). The ascetics of the three religions practised 'rainy-season retreat'. This practice of staying in one place right through the rainy season in course of time became a ceremonial ritual. Buddhism, more than any other religion, made elaborate prescriptions for such 'rainy-season residence'. The development of the institution of coenobium owes to a large extent to the Buddhist ascetics. They differentiated themselves from the wandering ascetics and called themselves **bhikkhus** or monks. In the Buddhist monachism, we find the coenobitic form, in contrast to the eremitic character of Brāhmaṇical fold.7
The Buddhist ascetics were mainly responsible for making living in monastery a permanent aspect of their spiritual life. The meteorological factor to a large extent contributed to the development of cenobium which in turn transformed the homeless wanderers of various religious persuasions into settled monks living in monasteries. Thus evolved the institution of monasticism in India.

Buddhist and Jaina monachisms evolved themselves into monasticisms probably in the 4th century B.C. through institutions such as vihāras and pālīs respectively which though differed in functions and organization, size and status, had in common the collective living for the sake of a higher spiritual life. Buddhist vihāra was one of the earliest institutions to stress the relevance and significance of monasticism to other religions. The emergence of Brahmanical monastic institutions in India was comparatively late.
MONASTICISM IN THE TAMIL COUNTRY

Asceticism was known to the Tamils in very ancient times and it was practised by the Tamils of the Sangam Age. It continued to flourish during the age of the Tamil epics. However, the principle of monasticism was unknown to the Brāhmaṇical sects then as we do not find any mention of the monasteries and pontiffs in the literature of the Sangam period.

Significantly in the Tamil country, it was Jaina monastic organisation rather than Buddhist which had greatly influenced the principal Brāhmaṇical sects, particularly Śaivism, in organizing their monastic institutions. Śaiva monastic activities in the Tamil country are noticed mainly from the seventh century A.D. The literary and epigraphic evidence bear testimony to the existence of Śaiva mathas, and their activities, centering around the temple.

ORIGIN OF ŚAIVA MATHAS

The origin of Śaiva mathas in the Tamil country is to be traced in the context of religious conflicts and
the consequent developments between seventh and ninth centuries A.D. The Tamil literature of the region clearly depicts a serious conflict between the Brāhmaṇical Vaishnava and Śaiva sects, on the one hand, and the heretical sects of Buddhism and Jainism, on the other. Owing to persistent rivalry between these two groups, the period between seventh and ninth centuries witnessed a significant socio-religious drift.

The religious conflict led to the revival of Brāhmaṇical sects and the consequent waning of the Jain and the Buddhist influences in the Tamil country. The Bhakti movement spearheaded by the Vaishnava Alvar and Śaiva Nayanārs led to the re-establishment of Brāhmaṇical sects against the heterodox sects. The Bhakti exponents who aimed at undermining the heretical sects of Jainism and Buddhism attracted, through their soul-stirring hymns of Tevāram and Divyaprabhanda, adherents from all strata of the society, irrespective of caste, creed and social status.

The Brāhmaṇical sects met successfully the challenge offered by the Jains and Buddhists both in the
ideological and in the organisational spheres. The growing awareness of the need to reorganise their systems resulted in the large-scale construction of temples and allied institutions. In fact, the erection of temples was more or less a sequel to this transformation. This process which commenced about seventh century A.D. coinciding with the popularisation of the Bhakti cult, grew stronger in the subsequent centuries and reached the peak during the imperial Chōla period. These temples which developed as the symbols of new religious authority and awareness transformed a non-organisational Śaivism into an organisational one.

In the above context, it may be surmised that the factors like the influence of monastic establishments largely of Jainism and to a certain extent, the Jaina-Śaiva conflict and the spread of Bhakti ideology and the need to propagate it had gone a long way in contributing to the origin of Śaiva matha in the Tamil country. How the above factors interacted to give rise to the emergence of the Śaiva matha is examined hereunder.

The spread of Jain faith in the Tamil country immediately before and after the beginning of the
Christian era is indicated by the Brahmi inscriptions found in the cave beds in various parts of the Tamil country (Pudukkottai area and Madurai and Tirunelveli districts). These inscriptions give the names of the ascetics who occupied natural caverns on hills and the lay followers, who provided the material basis for their support. By about the fifth century A.D., the Jains organized themselves into well-knit teams of missionaries. The epic Silappadikâravam bears testimony to the existence of Jaina Pallin. The formation of Drâvīga Mûla Saîkha at Madurai by Vajranandi in 470 A.D., which paved the way for the rapid spread of Jainism in the region around Madurai, was a landmark in the history of Jainism in the Tamil country. This Saîkha received patronage at the hands of the Kalâbhrâ rulers. The Jain monastery at Pâṭalipurâ (South Arcot district) was one of the early establishments for religious propagation. Jain scholars like Simhasûri and Sarvanandin were the inmates of this monastery in the fifth century A.D. which was patronized by the Pallava royal court. It continued to flourish in the first quarter of the seventh century A.D. The Pallâmkovil copper-plates of the time of Simhavârman (6th century A.D.) register the grant of a village as
Palligandam to the Jain preceptor Vajranandi of Paruttikkunnu (Jina Kanchi) situated near the Pallava capital Kanchi. The pattu referred to in the grant was a centre of Digambara Jain order and a prestigious centre of learning. This there was a marked increase of Jain monasteries in the Pre-Tevaraman days.

The Buddhist establishments were also vying with their Jain counterparts. The epic Silappadhikaram refers to the flourishing of many Buddhist monasteries like the Indra Vihara. Aravanagal was the head of the Buddhist Sangha in the Indra Vihara at Kaveripattinam. In the reign of Mahendravarm I, there was a Buddhist vihara at Kanchi called Rajavihara. The Mattavilasa-prashana portrays this monastery as a richly endowed institution. The Chinese pilgrim Huen-Tsang's accounts indicate the existence of many monasteries in the Tamil country. There was a large Sangharama at Kanchi which served the most eminent men of the country.

The establishments of the heterodox sects mentioned above and their monastic influence, particularly of Jaina establishments, on society increased. Their
increased influence seriously undermined the popularity of the Brahmical sects, particularly Śaiva sects. The Jain and Buddhist monasteries carried on religious propaganda through discussions and debates. These, particularly Jaina monasteries, consolidated the social basis of the sect by means of four-fold gifts of food, medicine, education and residence on a large scale. Jain charity was provided only to Jain followers. Non-Jain sects, particularly, those of Śaivism, in the absence of such monastic institutions could not win the confidence of the laity. Thus the influential monastic Jainism made the Śaivites realise the need to adopt such a monastic organisation in their fold in order to make their religion popular. The acute Jaina-Śaiva conflict in this period made the Śaiva Bhakti exponents and their followers feel the necessity of institutional basis for their religion. Hence, to counteract the growing popularity of the Jains and their institutions, and at the same time to popularise Śaivism, the Bhakti exponents themselves started founding mathas from the seventh century A.D. which carried on charitable activities like feeding, besides the propagation of religion. Thus the Śaivites accepted and adopted the Jain concept of monasticism.
At the commencement of the seventh century A.D., when the waves of the Bhakti movement touched the different parts of the Tamil country, the Tāvāram hymnists in pursuance of their objective to revive Śaivism, set out on their pilgrimage to the sacred Śaiva centres. They initiated and successfully carried on a fervent and militant religious movement, visiting almost all the temples of the region and offering soul-stirring hymns in praise of the presiding deities of each temple. They also enticed the common men to the religious fold by performing miracles, and at the same time successfully disputed the doctrines of the Jains and Buddhists. The Periappurāgān dealing with the lives of the Bhakti saints, clearly shows how the Nayanārs were successful in curbing the activities of Jains and Buddhists and turned the scales in their favour.

It has been rightly suggested that the Śaiva maṭha had come into existence with the Brāhmaṇical revivalist movement led by the Śaiva saints in the seventh century A.D. The Bhakti saints, during their itinerancy to various Śaiva centres had necessarily to
stay either within the temple complex or in a residence situated in the temple environs. These temporary residences of the itinerant saints had been designated as matha wherefrom they sprayed the seeds of the Bhakti ideology among the masses so as to make Saivism more appealing to the laity. Besides, some of the Nayanars themselves took the task of establishing matha. Muruga Nayanar, Appudi Adigal, Kungiliyakkalaya Nayanar, the contemporaries of Tirunavukkarasar and Sambandar, were heads of Saiva matha. Tirunavukkarasar and Sambandar had stayed in these matha during their tours of pilgrimage. Amarniti Nayanar had founded a matha at Tirunallur.

Tirunavukkarasar himself is credited with having founded a matha in Tiruppundurutti. During his stay in this matha, he composed some of his devotional songs. It is of interest to note that Tirunavukkarasar, as a Jain, spent a considerable time in the famous monastery at Patalipuram (near Cuddalore in South Arcot district), mastered the Jaina literature, obtained the name Dharma-sena and became the head of the Jain monastery. It was the awareness of the efficacy of the monastery as the institutional basis for the success of the Jain religion, that prompted Tirunavukkarasar to establish Saiva matha.
when he later became a Śaiva adherent and led the Bhakti movement. Tirunāvukkarasar is also said to have stayed in the mātha at Tiruvatigai known as Siddhavāḍa during his pilgrimage to different Śaiva centres. He himself referred to this mātha in one of his Padigam. The above instances afford clear evidences to show that the Śaiva māthas originated in the time of Tirunāvukkarasar and Sambandar. Thus the mātha in the Tamil country was a by-product of the Bhakti movement.

SPREAD OF ŚAIVA MĀTHAS

The Śaiva mātha which had its humble beginning in the seventh century A.D. passed through several stages of expansion throughout the Tamil country.

The first stage of its expansion began in the 7th - 8th centuries A.D. when the Nāyānārs associated themselves with the Śaiva māthas. The Tēvāṟṟum hymns contain a solitary reference to the mātha at Tiruvatigai and the contemporary epigraphs are silent about these establishments. The absence of any reference to the Śaiva mātha in the inscriptions of the seventh and eighth
centuries was perhaps due to the fact that the institution which just emerged in this period was simple in nature and yet to attract the attention of the donors. But the Periapurāṇam indicates the existence of a number of Śaiva māṭhas in the districts of Chingleput, South Arcot, Thanjavur, Madurai, and Chittoor, and at Kodungālur, the birth place of Kalāyarivar Nayanār in the Chāra country.

The period between ninth and tenth centuries A.D. represents a landmark in the history of the Śaiva māṭhas. It is for the first time that the institution started receiving grants for its maintenance. The earliest epigraphic reference to a Śaiva māṭha comes from Pillaiypāḷayam (Kāṇchi) belonging to the time of the Pallava king Dantivarman (a.s.n. 796 A.D.). The inscription records the grant of some lands by a certain Muttaraiyān to the Sirumergali temple (Śiva temple) at Pillipāḷayam and the māṭha attached to it. Obviously, the Muttaraiyān had endowed land to the already existing māṭha and temple at Pillipāḷayam as the inscription does not refer to any fresh construction of these two by him. Even though the date of the record is lost, it is certain that the māṭha
at Pillayāḷayam existed prior to Dantivarman in the 8th century A.D. Sennivāykal in the Trichy district had, during the reign of Nandivarman III, a Śaiva matha which was attacked by some people and in the attempt of protecting it from them, a Brāhmaṇ hero lost his life. 

We also come to know of a monastic establishment at Kāverippākkam (North Arcot district) from an inscription of 886 A.D. A record of the Pallava king Vijayakampanavarman dated in his 18th year registers a gift of land by an ascetic Nirañjana Guravar, the disciple of the matha at Tiruvorppiyur to the Śiva temple Nirañjanaśvaram. The above epigraphic evidence clearly indicates that these Śaiva mathas were taking roots in the Tamil country in this period.

The Śaiva monastic establishments which began during the Pallava period, had more elaborate and systematic development under the Cholas. The regions which came under the influence of the Śaiva monks in the 10th century A.D. include the districts of Chingleput, South Arcot, North Arcot, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Pudukkottai and Ramnad. To a great extent the Kāḷamukhas organised
the Śaiva monastic orders in the Tamil country, as they did in the Deccan. Tiruvorppiyūr in Chingleput district and Koḍumbāḷūr in Pudukkottai district were the most important centres where Kāḷāmukha māṭhas were established.

The period between eleventh and thirteenth centuries was an important phase of the expansion of the Śaiva monastic movement. The eleventh century saw the beginning of the rapid spread of the Gōlski school of Śaivism and its monastic establishments. The proliferation of the māṭhas throughout the Tamil country was on the increase in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. By this time the māṭha had become an important adjunct to Śiva temples in many places and most of them were affiliated either to the Gōlski Śaivism or Śaiva Siddhānta school. (The proliferation of Śaiva māṭhas and the influence of the monks are indicated by a huge body of Tamil inscriptions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries A.D. belonging mainly to the later rulers of imperial Chōla dynasty) and the rulers of the second Pāṇḍya Empire. This process reached its culmination in this period when a large number of māṭhas were founded and endowed with land grants and benefices.
The growth of Śaiva mathams in the Tamil country was rendered possible by many factors.

Firstly, the multiplication of Śiva temples was a potent factor that contributed to the increase in the number of Śaiva monastic centres. The temple-building activities which became popular during the rule of the Pallavas and the early Pāṇḍyas, increased largely during the age of the Chōlas. The temple, which originally was a place of worship gradually developed into a complex institution. These developments were factors of formidable significance in the evolution of Śaiva monasticism in the Tamil country as in the Deccan. The endowments made for charitable acts, like feeding, building rest-houses and imparting religious instruction in the temple, were instrumental in establishing mathams as separate entities attached to the temples.

Secondly, the countrywide movement of the monks fostered the Śaiva monastic institutions. South Indian Śaivism had a live contact with Śaivism in the rest of India. The famous matha at Tiruvörriyūr was founded by Valabha in 959 A.D. Valabha, who went to
the north for a dip in the holy Ganga after the death of his Chola Patron and returned to Tiruvorrigai, is said to have been impressed by the working of various Saiva monasteries in course of his journey. This inspired him to found a similar monastic institution at Tiruvorrigai.

It is held that the Chola king Rajendra I imported Saivas from the Gangetic region and established them in various places in the Chola country. The system of Saiva mathas that flourished in the northern territories would have inspired Rajendra I to invite many Saiva acharyas from that region which synchronised with the increase in number of mathas in the Tamil country, particularly Giri mathas. The movement of the Saivite monks continued even in the late Chola times. In 1214 A.D. a certain Umakara Deva Iravalar, the disciple of Jnanasiva Iravalar of the santana of Lakshadhyaya Iravalar of the Kolla-matha at Varanasi, gifted some money to the deity at Tiruppappur in the Chingleput district. In 1217 A.D. another Iravalar of the Bhiksha-matha of Varanasi is mentioned in an inscription at Pandanallur in the Thanjavur
district. Contacts between Śaiva monastic institutions in the different parts of India are also well attested to by the epigraphs from outside the Tamil country. Thus the movement of the Śaivite missionaries was a significant force that acted favourably for the growth and spread of Śaiva monasteries in the Tamil country.

The rapid progress of Śaiva mathas in the Tamil country was also due to the patronage they received at the hands of the various social ranks. Their proliferation is linked to the increasing popularity of gifts and endowments of land and other objects, but for which their maintenance would not have been possible. This has been dealt in greater detail in the eighth chapter.

Thus the multiplicity and complexity of Śiva temples, the movement of Śaivite missionaries and the patronage extended by the heterogenous social ranks were the important factors responsible for the growth of the Śaiva mathas throughout the Tamil country.
REFERENCES


4. *Ibid.*, John Marshall recognises the figure in Indus seal (three headed figure) as the proto-type of Śiva in his aspect of Paśupati. The seal suggests that Śiva in Mohenjō-dāro is the prince of Yāgins, the typical ascetic and self-mortifier.

5. Sukumar Datta, *'Monasticism in India'*, (Ed.)
H. Bhattacharya, *The cultural heritage of India*, vol.11, pp. 582-583.


11. Śilappadikāram, 21:53 (aravōr); 10:50 (tavattir); 10:192, 216 (tavam); 16:149 (tavattōr); 6:97 (tavattuṟai mārkal); 8:100 (mātavam).


Buddhists engaged the Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva saints in frequent acrimonious controversies at which the former were invariably defeated. Sambandar and Tirumaṅgalai Alvaṟ are credited with having exposed the Buddhist doctrines in public debates and thereby defeating several Buddhist leaders. The Periapurāṇam refers to one such controversy at Talichchēri between Sambandar and the Buddhist leaders Sariputta and Buddha nandi in which the Buddhist scholars were defeated and converted to Śaivism. See Ibid., 28: 904–926.
The Jain designs, with the approval of the Pāṇḍya king to kill Sambandar and the latter spoiling those designs through miracles and subsequently Sambandar putting an end to the Jaina influence in Pāṇḍya country are known from the Perivaram. See Ibid., 28: 688-704.

The Jaina-Śaiva conflict is also known from the stories of Naminandi adigai Nayanar and Daṇḍi adigai Nayanar. See Perivaram, 27:7-16; 31:4-24. The clashes between Jains and Śaivites which started in the time of these two became more violent subsequently in the time of Tirunāvukkarasar and Sambandar. See also R.Champakalakshmi, 'Religious conflict in Tamil country - A Reappraisal of Epigraphic evidence', Paper presented to the Fourth Epigraphical Society Congress, Madras, 1978.


14. I. Mahadevan, 'Corpus of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions', (Ed.) R. Nagasvamy, Seminar on Inscriptions, pp.57-73; See also M.S.Ramaswami Ayyangar, Studies in South Indian Jainism, p.34.
15. Śīlappadhikāraṇam, 10:36, Kavundi Pallī.


17. R. Champakalakshmi, op.cit.


20. Śīlappadhikāraṇam, 10:14.


22. Mattavilāsa Prahāsana, 64.


26. The earliest literary reference to Śaiva Matha occurs only in the seventh century A.D.

See Tirunāvukkarasar Tevāram, Tiruvatiṣai, 6:7:12.

27. For details see C.V. Narayana Ayyar, Origin and early history of Śaivism in South India, pp.126 ff.
28. C. Meenakshi, op. cit., p. 239.

29. The term matha in its narrow sense meant a place where an ascetic resided.


31. Ibid., 25: 3, 6.

32. Ibid., 21:247.

33. Ibid., 7:4, 9, 12.

34. Ibid., 21:389, tīngalum gñāvirum tōrum tirumaḍam tīṅonru avthār.

35. Ibid., 21: 38, 39.

36. Ibid., 5: 23, 34.

37. Tirunāvukkarasār Tēvāram, Tiruvatigai, 6:7:12.

38. Ibid., There was a matha known as Siddhavēṣam in Tiruvatigai attached to the Śiva temple there.


43. **Ibid.**, 23: 1024.

44. **Ibid.**, 37:3.

45. **A.R.E.**, 20/1921: Hereafter the reference to inscription notified in the Annual report of epigraphy is indicated by the serial number of the inscription and the corresponding year of the report.

46. **S.I.I.**, xii, no.58.

47. **S.I.I.**, xii, no.79.

48. 372/1911.


51. **E.I.**, xxvii, no.47.

53. A number of copper-plates and stone inscriptions which register land, money and other endowments to temple and its various incumbents indicate the complex nature of the South Indian temple.


55. *E.I.*, xxvii, no.47.

56. K.N. Nandi, *op.cit.*, p.82.


58. 111/1930.

59. 72/1931.