

TEMPLES OF SOUTHERN INDIA – THE HOLY ALTAR

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Abstract: India with its rich cultural heritage and glorifying past has a population with majority of Hindus and is centered around by temples since 1000's of years. It's a land inhabited by god himself in the form of idols in temples. People flock from all over the world in search of spirituality and blissfulness. India especially southern India is a hub of religion of the country. The imprints left behind by our ancestors prove the divine eternity that existed through their works. Southern India is marked by a number of holy temples, which were constructed by the great kings, who ruled India. Many of south Indian temples are known for their architectural majesty and sculptural grandeur, . People from all over the world visit these temples, in order attain spiritual knowledge to realize oneself and their duties to be rendered towards the society, family and oneself

1. INTRODUCTION

“Never reside in a place that has no temple” says a Tamil proverb. More of a ritual, worshipping god in temple is a way of life for Hindus in India. According to Hinduism it's a strong belief that god alone can protect mankind. For the well being of oneself people start the day seeking the grace of god for prosperity as a daily routine. Temples are place to realize oneself and gain positive energy from within the temple and its surroundings, anything that dwells in the temple has its own energy and its significance, every single object has a purpose to be inside the temple which is associated to daily life of a human being. Temples are more like a school that teaches life and the way to live it.

“MAN is anthropomorphic and is inclined to conceive God in vivid and pictorial form. He cannot express his mental attitude except through symbolism and art. However inadequate the symbol may be as expressions of the real, they are tolerated so long as they help human spirit in its effort after the Divine. The symbol need not be superseded so long as it suggests the right stand point. Realizing as it does the force of the lower forms of worship, Hinduism has developed a religious atmosphere permeated by the highest philosophic wisdom as well as symbolic worship round which much glorious art has gathered. It has rooms for all men of all grades of cultural equipment and religious instinct. It is idle to stifle the impulses of the child by breaking its play things, simply because we are grown up and do not find any need for them.” – Dr. S. Radhakrishna

2. STUDY AREA

The study area involves the importance of temples in Hindu culture, Kerala as a early centre of worship, evolution of temple worship in Kerala, starting from the beginning of ancestor worship of nature to idols and the introduction of bhakthi cult and its acceptance in Kerala

Main Reasons for temple worship according to Hinduism

1. Divine oomph generated from idol inside the Temple

The Hindu temple according to the Hindu belief, a site of the celestial bodies. Situated purposefully and built for a particular deity, the temple houses the divine energy of that particular deity in its finest state. The site, the structural design, and the temple's association with the planetary systems, all come together, in the best possible configuration for the utmost possible benefit. So a devotee worshipping at the temple stands to gain more than if he or she were worshipping at home. This is also the reason why Temples have more crowds on particular days, specifically for particular deities.

2. Pariharam or Doshas

According to Hindu belief, every individual is born under the control of planets and for some the influence is more pronounced. More of a selfish reason to visit temples is to perform Pariharam or the Doshas. The planetary influence, good or bad, can therefore be utilized or countered by visiting temples and performing different set of Pariharam rituals. A large section of the temple goers in India, belong to this group.

3. Spirituality

This is more of rational concept. Not necessarily those who visit should be religious; they can be spiritual sects too. People of this category come more for spiritual reasons than for religious reasons, they flock to the temple from all over the world in search of

peace of mind , body and soul through meditation and for self-realization. It is assumed that the ambience at temples, the sounds, the things to see, the smells– the cymbals, the vision of the deity, the incense– all add to the surroundings, creating a significant contact on the senses of the devotee, taking them to a state of untouched consciousness, wherein spiritual union with the divine becomes easier.

These three main reasons aside, there can be a plethora of personal reason for us to worship at our favourite temples and not all of them will fall within the domain of the explicable– As the saying goes, to each his own.

3. ORIGIN OF TEMPLES – KERALA

There were many stages in the development of temple worship in Kerala. Marar (1961) in his scholarly Malayalam work on the epic Mahabharata refers that there is no strong evidence to believe that temples existed during pre-Vedic and Vedic periods. People started worshipping idols after the Vedic period. Temple worship originated in Kerala during the 4th century B.C. Many scholars have traced the origin of temples in Kerala, but there has been no mention who built the temple during the period. A number of changes and revolutions took place which led to the changeover from the worship of nature to idol worship in the temple.

Almost every village of any importance in Kerala has its temple, round which centers in a very large measure the corporate civic life of the community which lives in it. Temple must have existed in this part of the country from time immemorial. When the institution of temples came into existence in the fourth century B.C., Mahakavi Ullur says, it was declared that they were not only yajnasalas for public worship. The earliest Agamas now existent cannot be described to any period earlier than the fourth century of Christian era. They describe the worship offered in the temple as parathayajna, i.e., sacrifice for others, as opposed to svarthyajna i.e., sacrifice on behalf of oneself in one's home, which was the pre-Buddhist form of Aryan worship. The chief priest if termed acarya and the other priests are the ritviks. Pursusottama-Samhita says that the flagstaff in a temple represents the yupa in a yagasala. Many theories are advanced, a large number of epigraphical and archaeological records are pointed out and several changes in the evolution of civilization are cited to trace the origin of temples. The earliest epigraphical evidence of the existence of temples take us back only to the age of the Pallava kings (A.D. 200-900). In his valuable History of Colas, Prof. K.A. NilakantaSastri observes: The south Indian temple came up in one of the several ways. Some shrines were erected in places where trees had been regarded perhaps from pre-Aryan days as the abode of the deity and had been worshipped. As such; these trees came to be regarded as sthala-vrksas even after the rich hues of Indo-Aryan myths had gathered round these places; examples are found in the mango (ekamra) tree of Kanchipuram, the Jambu tree of Jambukesvarm on the island of Srirangam, and the Tillai forest of Chidambaram. Other shrines arose on the spots where Puranics stories and incidents were localized by popular belief. These two classes find a prominent place in the hymns of the Tevaram and the Divyaprabandham. After being celebrated in song by the Nayanars and the Alvars they gained in importance and naturally attracted the attention of generous temple-builders. Then there were sepulchral shirnes, pallippattis as they were known, built on the relics of sanits, heroes and kings. Temples of this class appear to have been more numerous than we are apt to imagine, though only a few of these attained any great size of celebrity. Some examples of such shrines have been noticed. Lastly, there were temples which rose at the bidding of powerful monarchs on sites of their choice, the most conspicuous instances of this class being the two Brhadisvara temples at Tanjore and Gangaikodacholapuram erected by Rajaraja 1. Perhaps the Kailasanatha of Kanci, and 2. The Kailasanatha of Ellora, must be included in the same category”.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, South India produced the two great Hindu champions, Kumarila and Sankara, who fought the battle of ancient Hinduism against heresy, though there was little persecution in the based sense of the word. Under the leadership of Sankara, Hinduism absorbed many of the distinctive features of the speculative system and the practical organization of later day Buddhism. This is the chief reason why, on the one hand, Buddhism was so completely banished from South India in later times and, on the other, the opponents of Sankara's system found it easy to stigmatize him as a Buddhist in disguise.

As a religious institution, the temple in Kerala reaches back to a remote antiquity, and the existence of numerous temples (kottams) of Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain deities is fully attested by the Sangham literature. The early temples were structures of brick and mortar, or under the Pallavas, carved out of solid blocks of granite, rock-cut cave temples. Temples find no mention in the Vedas. The Vedic people did not raise temples because of the peculiar nature of their worship at that time which did not then require such edifices. The forms of worship prevailing in the Vedic age were widely different form these prevailing at present under popular practice. R.C. Dutt points out that temple worship and temple building were not a part of the Hindu religion before the Buddhistic revolution, and that Hindu temple architecture commenced only with the sixth century A.D.

In the introduction of BhadantaNajarjuna's Rasavaivesika Sutras Dr. K. SanakaraMenon says that according to the Vedic Hindu religion, there was no worship of gods in temples and that Buddhists started viharas where they worshipped the Buddha. Viharas were not merely places of worship, but also educational institutions where knowledge of all kinds, material and spiritual were imparted to people and cures effected of all diseases gratis. When Buddhism was extirpated from Kerala, the viharas were converted into temples.

Nothing can be more beautifully picturesque than the situation of the temples in Kerala. They are all located in the best possible sites available, either on the top of a hill, or on verge of a large lake, or by the side of a running stream embosomed in the exuberant foliage of majestic trees. They are surrounded with groves and tanks for the refreshment and devotion of worshippers. There is separate class of Sanskrit works devoted to the subject of temples and temple worship. They are known as Agamas, Pancaratra, Pasupata, VisnuSamhita, Kamikagma, Vaikhanasagama, IsanaGurudevaPaddhati, Tatvapradipika, TantraSamuccaya and TantraPraysascitta. They are some of the very important authorities accepted in Kerala.

4. ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The worship of ancestors is a common practice in Kerala. It takes various forms, the nature of which is determined more or less by the place the particular individual hold in religious, social or political life.

As in other parts of the country, the simplest type consists of the sraddha, the offering of oblations by the nearest direct descendant of the deceased, on the anniversary of his or her death. This practice is common to all, and the failure to perform the sraddha is punished with social ostracism. A general sraddha also is commonly performed by the senior member of the family to all the deceased ancestors en masse on every new-moon day. This is done for the satisfaction of those ancestors, whose lives have become extinct. Unlike the first type, it is not obligatory. This sraddha is purely a domestic function.

Another widely prevalent type is the setting apart of a particular room as the abode of the spirits of the deceased, who are supposed to safeguard the interests of the family. A lighted lamp is kept in this room, and admission is restricted to members of the family and even these are allowed only after they have purified themselves by bathing and the like. This also is a purely domestic type, chiefly current amongst the Nayars. There is no daily worship and sometimes, not even annual worship. The practice is not prohibited amongst the higher castes of Hindus. One of the rooms in the royal palace at Cochin is thus kept in memory of a ruler who died there.

The third, a still less common, but not rare type seems to be closely related to the preceding. It consists in preserving in a place in the house – sometimes in the main building, sometimes in an out-house – symbols to keep up the memory of a distinguished ancestor. The place thus assigned is looked upon as sacred; and the symbols used are sometimes a statue, or a weapon, generally a sword or a trident, if the ancestor happened to be a warrior; or beads is only a family shrine, and one of the members of the family acts as the priest. Such shrines are not generally open to outsiders. Worship is offered to the deceased ancestor daily, weekly, monthly or annually as the case may be; but seasonal and annual festivities are celebrated. The most noted instance of this type is the shrine kept by the PalurKaniyan, a traditional astrologer, to glorify the memory of, and get inspiration from, his distinguished ancestor. A slightly amplified form of the same, and therefore, appealing to a wider circle, constitutes another type. This may be of two kinds; sometimes the family shrine is thrown open to the public, when, for instance, an offering at a particular family shrine is supposed to be efficacious as a palliative for disease and the like. Such for instance, are shrines originally set up in honour of a distinguished Mantra-vadin (an expert in black magic) and later thrown open to the public. Such a popular shrine exists at Itappalli. At other times the shrine may be set up by a particular sect of people to honour one of their distinguished ancestors. As a notable instance of this may be cited the building of a temple at Kalati in honour of Sri Sankracarya by his disciples. It is not a sectarian temple, but a temple for all Hindus. In these, there are daily ceremonies and annual festivals, a member of the family acting as a priest in the former case and a Brahman, in the latter.

Such family shrines and sectarian, class, or professional shrines sometimes grow into public temples. The passage of time and the growth of legends around the shrine probably account for this development. The shrine of the CeramanPerumal at Tiruvanickulam near Kotungallur is an instance of this. Local patriotism sometimes hastens such a development. In such shrines, there are all the paraphernalia of an ordinary temple.

5. KERALA AS EARLY CENTRES OF WORSHIP

The ancient people of Kerala worshipped Kali and Sasta. Kali was their deity for protection and Sasta was their boundary guardian. This practice of worship must have been in vogue in Kerala from the remotest times. In the worship of the Goddess Kali there are certain peculiarities, unique to Kerala. These peculiarities clearly show that there was some such cult existing in probably a crude, yet quite individualistic form. When the Dravidians came to Kerala they might have accepted these indigenous practices and made certain modifications agreeable to their beliefs and practices. Similarly Aryans too would have adopted the same policy towards them.

According to PanditKunelattuParameswaranMenonKalam, Kalari and Kavuvu were places of worship in ancient Kerala. Kalan, Kali, Nili, Kurumba, Emuri, Aran and Ayyan were their deities. Kavuvu is the technical term used for the temples dedicated to Ayyappan, Kali and Kurumba, Ksetra for the temples dedicated to Visnu, Siva and others, and Ambalam is a common term for both Kavuvu and Ksetra. Originally the people of Kerala were ancestor worshippers. For that purpose they established Kalaris in every family. In course of time they felt the necessity of a centre for common worship in each social unit. Such shrines came to be known as Kavuvu.

They were generally located either at the foot of a tree or inside a cave. In the early times, the offerings of food to these deities might have been sacrificed to these deities. Human sacrifices were not uncommon for attaining great things in those remote days. Such Kavuvus and customs are not completely obsolete even now, though in ninety-nine cases out of hundred there has been radical change in the form, customs, priests, and even in the location, invocation, name and features of these deities. Kali, Nili, Kota, Kurumba, Cakki, Ottamulacci and Ottappalli have all disappeared and in their places are now Durga, Kartyaayani, Parvati, Lalita, Bala, Tirupura and Bhadra. Instead of the mere foot of trees and seats of rocks, there is now the temple with all its religious architecture. Instead of the mere shapeless piece of rock worshipped as the goddess, there is now the idol featured in various forms and armed with different weapons as described in the iconographical works. The priests in ancient times were the Kuruppu, the Kurukkal, Unni or Atika (all below the order of Brahmans); they have now been replaced by the Brahman priests. The sacrificing of the cock and the goat, the pouring of the kuruti (a liquid solution of lime, turmeric and water), the whirling of the patnam (cloth tied round a stick, dipped in oil and lighted) with the chanting of certain peculiar hymns, the burning of the telli (a kind of combustible powder) before the idol, the dancing and roaring of the veiccappatu (the person possessed by the goddess and representing Her) decked in a red cloth, a waist let of jingling bells, and the sword and the anklet, and uttering oracles without moving the lips, are all now conducted outside the temple. Tiyattu, Kalameluttumpattum, Pana, and Mutiyettu are also

conducted outside the temple. As a substitute of blood, there is now the Kuruti or the red sandal; for wine, honey, plantains and sugar, and for flesh, the rice pudding saturated with ghee and jaggery, or the loaf. Some sympathetic people, filled with pity for the poor animals thus sacrificed by the people of Kerala, must have in those days, tried to stop this type of sacrifice in various ways, as is clear from Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai. Even today these customs and practices are in vogue in Bengal and Ceylon. When the Brahman and Ksatriya kings became more and more prominent in Kerala the ancient customs gave way to the new order. It may be said that temples and religious rites could not have existed in the remote past, there must have been the source of the origin of temples. This kind of hero-worship is not peculiar to Kerala or to the Hindus, but to all races and caste.

6. CONCLUSION

We often worship in temples without knowing much about the value of each of them. But it is vital to acquaint ourselves with the mythology behind the temple, its significance and stories that are related to it which would make our devotion more meaningful, and M.V. Ananthapadmanabhachariar in a discourse.

Temples were built keeping in mind the social and economic well being of people as it serves in many ways apart from than spiritual aspects. Astonishing are the reasons like the structure of the temple tower was always built taller than the other structures keeping in mind the aged, ailing and disabled people in mind as they cannot make it to the temple to seek the grace of god so taller the tower, they can worship the temple from their home. Temple water tanks were built as a reservoir to store water. Scientifically if we are to analyse, temples are more of centre for physical exercise - when a person walks around the shrines 2) meditation by focusing on the divine statuette made out of wood or stone results in greater concentration and peace of mind 3) barter knowledge and information among the devotees 4) energizing the mind through listening to the divine mantras of God and religious discourse made by scholars and pundits, and 5) Recharging the mind and body through the transmission of magnetic and medicinal effects of the water, flowers, twigs, etc. used in the poojas.

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