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## EVOLUTION, ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF TEMPLES IN TAMIL COUNTRY

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### Abstract :

Temples reflect a well developed civilization. A number of temples or temple-sites are located in Kaveri region. An account of temples is found befitting here. The temple has had an enduring ideological importance in Indian history, which makes it the central focus of historical processes like religions, social, economic and political. Temple came to be the legitimating institution of the ruling elite, the king in particular, who acquired legitimacy and tried to convey the authority through the temple and its symbolism. As a super ordinate institution, temple acted as an integrating force for organizing society, economy and polity. In effect as miniature cosmos, it symbolized the territory enrolled by a ruling dynasty. It also needs to be understood that the temple being integral to these process is inseparably linked to the development of religion,

sectarian traditions, society, economy and polity.

**Key Words:** Temple, God, Polity, Worship, Sangam, Bhakti, Brahmanical, Brahmana, Puranic.

### INTRODUCTION

History of mankind has shown that man cannot live without God. "If God did not exist , it would be necessary to invent him" declared Voltaire. Belief in God, in a cosmic power or cosmic law ,in a super human spirit or Being is basic to all culture. As the race progressed, temple became pivotal because they served as a sacred meeting place for the community to congregate and revitalize their spiritual energies. Large temples were usually built at picturesque places, especially on river banks, on top of hills, and on the sea shore. Smaller temples or open air shrines can crop up first about anywhere-by the road side or even under the tree.<sup>1</sup>

How and when the first temple took its birth is to anybody's guess. Temples did not seem to exist during Vedic period. The main object of worship was fire that stood for God. This holy fire was lit on a platform in the open air under the sky, and oblations were offered to the fire. It is not certain when exactly the Indo Aryans first started building temples for worship. The scheme of building temples was perhaps a concomitant idea of idol worship.

God can be malevolent as well as benevolent in nature. It is important that the temple sight symbolize is one that will exhilarate him. The Puranas state the "The God always play near the rivers and mountains and springs". Sacred sites in India therefore, are usually associated with water. Shades of trees and lakes of India are often considered to be sacred and they have healing and purifying powers.



### Concept of Temple

The gradual development of Mahayanism and Hinduism is evidence responsible for the erection of temple because Mahayana produced figural representation of Lord Buddha and Bodhisattavas which needed sacred places for worship.<sup>2</sup>

### Evolution of Temples

In the early ages temples were not constructed but only huts were provided which later on got evolution till it become a solid structure. During the inclination towards Brahmanism, the Hindu Gods needed a place for exhibition. They thus provided simple solid structure to shelter the sacred place for worship. During Gupta time the solid stone blocks were used to construct the temple. After this stage the rituals became more complex. Hence it required more deities and sculptures because of which the temple became larger in size with more elements.

### Evolution of Temples in Tamil Nadu

The primitive Tamil was a believer in totems. Ancestral worship and totemic worship were inseparable and worship of the dead hero was the phase of ancestor-worship. But these belong to a period very much anterior to the Sangam period. Later the ideas of Godhead and modes of worship had reached a mature stage with most of the Tamils. The aborigines believed in Gods who were supposed to reside in the hollow of trees. The snake which resided in such hollows was a special object of worship. The *Kantu*, a piece of planted log of wood was an object of worship.<sup>3</sup> It served as God and it was preferably stationed in the shade of the Banyan tree. The trees themselves, being totems developed into religious institutions and particular trees came to be associated with particular gods and their temples, became local trees later.<sup>4</sup>

The Sangam cult centres like Kottam, Koyil and Nagar had no institutional character and even in the transitional phase they are described as centers which people are advised to visit for the worship of a particular deity. The references in the late and post Sangam works to Brahmanical forms, in which bloody sacrifices of animals and birds were made and belong to the transitional stage. The universalization of the *Tinaii* deities and the institutionalization of the cult centre as a temple with Brahmanical forms of worship as the chief focus achieved its fruition in the early medieval period that is, in a totally transformed socio-political context.<sup>5</sup>

### Bhakti Movement

Bhakti was a crucial element in the evolution and spread of Puranic religion, which emerged by the sixth century A.D., as a universal and formal system in the Indian subcontinent as a whole.<sup>6</sup> In the Tamil region the expansion of Vedic religion was intrinsically linked with local and popular traditions and their interaction with Brahmanical religion is a two way process. It was a synchronic and at times, diachronic evolution. It would be too simplistic or facile to explain it as an interaction between the 'Great' and 'Little' traditions.<sup>7</sup>

The major impact of Bhakti ideology was more significant and it led to the expansion of the role of the temple in restructuring society and economy. The temple based Bhakti was capable of developing into a transcendental norm and hence acquired a centrality providing a focus for the achievement of uniformity among various sects given their differences. Several non-conformist elements and religious sects who observed extreme forms of rites could also be integrated through Bhakti ideology.

The Bhakti movement spearheaded by the Tamil Alvars (Vaishnavite saints) and Nayanmars ( Saivate saints) marks the beginning of the ascendancy of the Brahmanical socio-religious order, that is, the dominance of the Puranic vaishnava and saiva sects, and the decline of the Sramanic religions of Jainism and Buddhism. The socio-economic and political context in which the conflict between the Brahmanical religions and the Sramanic religions needs to be situated is the general decline of trade-inland and maritime from about the third century A..D., and the emergence of land as the economic resource through a land grant system to the temple.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the change from the early historical to the early medieval period was one in which Brahmanical religions assumed the position of the main stream tradition. The revival was more a transformation of society and religious systems through new institutional forces.

### **Brahmanical Influence**

The context was the decline of trade and urbanism and the emergence of an agrarian order dominated by the Brahmanical Varna hierarchy, which had not consolidated itself in the early historical period. The change may be seen even from the Fifth Century A.D., marked by the earliest land grants to brahmanas and temples.<sup>9</sup> The land distribution and control through such institutions represented by brahmadeyas and temple-nucleated settlements, to oust the so called heterodox faiths. Brahmanical religions achieved this change through a process of acculturation by incorporating popular and folk elements in worship and ritual, and by assimilating tribal and ethnic groups into the social order through the temple.

The societal change visible from the Sixth Century A.D., was the establishment of the *varna* hierarchy, in which the Kshatriya status was assigned to the new ruling families and the traditional ruling families, by the fabrication of impressive genealogies in the prasastis which were composed by the Brahmanas in return for royal patronage and land grants, with the kshatriya and the brahmana at the apex of the power structure. The rest of society was placed at the lower levels of the stratified order, with a ritual ranking around the temple. The temple was not only the major institutional base for mobilizing and redistributing economic resources, but also an integrative force and orbit for social organization and the ranking of all the other occupational groups' tribal and ethnic groups of forests and hills.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the Kaveri region that this process is traceable through a rich corpus of early Tamil classics and transitional phase of the spread of Puranic-Brahmanical tradition. Bhakti was propagated through the vernacular language and idiom in their emotionally powerful hymns expressing devotion to a personal god housed in the temple. The Tamil hymnal literature expresses a protest against orthodox Vedic Brahmanism, and they were the recipients of impressive land grants from the ruling families. The temple, therefore, became the focal point of social organization and ritual ranking among various caste, occupational groups and ethnic or tribal people. All of these were brought into the sphere of temple society through Bhakti as the legitimating ideology for socio-political organization. These temples were controlled and managed by brahmana land holders, non-brahmana or vellala land holders of the *Ur* and the *Nadu*.<sup>11</sup> (Agrarian settlement and peasant region respectively)

Viewed from various points, the post-Sangam and pre-seventh century period was one of ascendancy for the 'non-orthodox' creeds. The seventh century religious developments - which are generally regarded in conventional histories as a revival of orthodox forms - led to the serious conflict between the two in the royal and urban centers. This revival was achieved, it is said, through Bhakti, which popularized the puranic religions.

Royal conversion was the symbol of change and hence central to this conflict. The Bhakti ideal emanated and spread in a context of social differentiation where conflicts centred around patronage and social dominance as seen in Kanchi and Madurai. Presumably, the ideology of Bhakti throwing open the path of salvation to all, irrespective of caste, imbibed the ideals of the 'non-orthodox creeds, that is, birth and caste as being no obstacles to salvation, and thereby succeeded in rooting out 'heretical' beliefs.'<sup>12</sup>

Thus the concept of Bhakti acted in two distinct ways in establishing the Brahmanical temple as a pivot for the enactment of the various roles of society. One was by encountering the increasing influence of the heterodox religions, which led to their ultimate decline of subordination. In fact, Jainism, which was more widespread and influential than Buddhism, became as much a part of puranic religion and temple based cult as Vaishnavism and Saivism were. The other was more significant, in that it induced messianic expectations among the lower orders of the varna-based society through the ideal of salvation.

The temple based Bhakti was also capable of developing into a transcendental norm and hence, acquired a centrality that provided a focus for achieving uniformity among different religions and sects, given their

differences. There is, however, no evidence of royal initiative or participation in building canonical temples till the end of the ninth century A.D.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of epigraphic evidences, it would be possible to show that both Saiva and Vaishnava Bhakti centers are known only through the records of Parantaka-I and Aditya -I.<sup>14</sup>

The temple was a determining factor in the expansion of the sacred and temporal domains, which were stupendous royal projects and which mark the apex of the Bhakti movement.<sup>15</sup>

The temple, as the major channel of socio-political communication, conveyed the royal orders through inscriptions. Equally important was the fact that it became the venue of the enactment of plays that narrated the king's achievements both in sacred and the political spheres. Temple entertainments included music and dance. Festivals instituted by the royal family on birth asterisms and on their victories, and the setting up of royal images in addition to these Bhakti saints also served to glorify royal power.

There is a record of reciprocal flow of money, gold and land gifts to the temple, and their investment with local institutions in different regions.<sup>16</sup> Auditing of temple accounts and reorganisation of the redistributive system through royal officers suggest royal penetration into local organization through intervention in the working of the ideological apparatuses.

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