



Religious Attitudes Of The Madurai Nayaks

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ABSTRACTS

Temples are living monuments and symbols of Cultural traits of this region. The Nayak society, majority is Hindu. But the kings were tolerant towards other religion. Madurai the capital of the Tamil rulers, and the temple city and the cultural centre for religion, education, fine arts and social harmony. The temples of Thiruparam kuntram, Alagarkoil, Kuthiarkundu, Solavandan, Meenakshi temple, Koodal Alagar temple, Hanuman temple, Nellaiappar temple at Tirunelveli are the renowned and the abodes of spiritual heritages. Through religious festivals social harmony was brought among all sections of the society.

Keywords: Religious Significants - Hinduism – Islam – Christianity –Temples – Art and Architecture – Art and Literature – Fairs and Festivals – Nayak contributions.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is the most significant aspect of culture because it is closely associated and inter-related with the day-to-day life and activities of man. Religion is a Social-Cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, moral beliefs that relates humanity to supernatural and spiritual elements. Temples are living monuments and symbols of the cultural traits of a region.¹ The belief over religious ideas enabled the people to express them in their life by thoughts and deeds. In Nayak society majority of the people were Hindus. In the cities and villages, people of other religions such as Christianity and Islam were found either as converts or immigrants or Missionaries. The pious Nayaks were tolerant towards other religious sects during their reign for about two centuries.

Nayak Kings allowed the European Missionaries, to propagate and preach Christianity within their domain. The Portuguese constructed many churches on the east coast of their kingdom and continued their Missionary activities of propagating and converting people of that region.² As a consequence, the Christian population was found more, in the east coast of the Tamil country. The Catholics, contributed a lot to the growth of education and uplift ment of the depressed people with

their charity. The Nayaks stay in the minds of Madurai people due to their patronage in temples and religious pursuits. They extended and beautified the temple complexes and also encouraged the inflow of people as migrants. They offered the opportunity for their livelihood by serving in the temples. They utilized specified amount and the surplus revenue of the state was diverted for the temple activities.³ Almost all the Nayak kings had interest in, veneration, admiration and adoration for Hinduism and spent most of their wealth on constructing and renovating temples, which became the radiating centres of culture of the land.

Temples under the Nayaks

Madurai the capital of the Tamil rulers, the temple city and the cultural centre for religion, education, fine arts, social harmony and economical prosperity, was a renowned centre for the Nayaks. Irrespective of their division and region, they dedicated and involved solely in the activities of the temples.⁴ One of the rare features found in the temples of the Nayak age was the erection of statues of the Nayak rulers with their consorts and their officials such as Dalavay or Poligars, who were responsible for the improvements of those temples.⁵

The temples at Thirupparankundram, Alagarkovil, Kuthiyarkundu, Sholavandan, Natham Kovilpatty had new lease of life during the Nayak era. In Madurai, the following temples, namely Meenakshi temple, the Koodal Alagar temple, Prasanna Venkateswara Perumal temple, South masi street and all the Hanuman temples located around the North, South, East and West Veli streets as well as at Palanganatham in Madurai were the beneficiaries. Thus the Nayaks were considered the patrons of Vaishnavite and Saivaite temples which were the abodes of spiritual heritage.⁶

Srirangam, the holy place of Hindus was situated about eight km north to Trichinopoly. Among the temples in Trichinopoly and its suburbs, the most important one was the Ranganatha Temple in the Srirangam Island.⁷ Though this temple was built in stages at various periods, its glory was revived after the advent of the Vijayanagar and Nayak rulers, specially in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁸ Thirumalai Nayak, Chokkanatha Nayak and Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak have contributed lot to the construction of additional **mandapams** and administration of this temple.⁹ Another remarkable temple of Lord Shiva was at Thiruvanaika or Jambukesvaram, it was situated a half km from Srirangam, was also patronized by the Nayaks, who built the major part of this temple. The Mariamman Temple at Samayapuram, was patronized by the Nayak rulers. The Nayaks built and renovated many temples in several places such as Srivilliputhur, Tirunelveli, Krishnapuram, Tiruchenkodu, Palani, Trichendur and Rameswaram.

The Nayaks constructed structural stone temples which carried out the same style of constructing several storied towers or **gopurams** in the temples. It was during their period, number of **gopurams** increased in proportion to the number of corridors or **praharams**, especially at Meenakshi temple in Madurai.¹⁰ Out of twelve **gopurams** in three corridors of Meenakshi Sundareswar Temple at Madurai, ten gopurams were constructed during the period of the Nayaks. They were the last great rulers of the Madurai Kingdom who built massive structural temples with huge towers in abundance. Though the style of gopuram construction begun under the later Pandya rulers, it attained a monumental testimony with grace and beauty only during the reign of the Nayaks. Standing monuments reveal the artistic genius and the aesthetic taste, interest and efforts of the Nayak rulers, also they reflect the culture of their age.¹¹

The cultural history, the reign of Thirumalai Nayak was an epoch making era because of his philanthropic services to religion and tradition, arts and letters, architecture and sculpture. The gopuram of Sri Andal Temple, Srivilliputtur, was built by him, which now served as the **emblem and symbol** of Tamil Nadu Government. His successors took him, as their guide and brought this temple

to its present day form and shape, as the most glorious cultural monument, not only in Tamil Nadu but also in the world.

The most important Temples:

The Madurai Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple

Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple is known for its splendid art gallery where each stone and image depicts lot about the traditions and breaths the cultural ethos of the people. It represents the four major streams of beliefs namely the Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and the worship of Skanda. The concentric rectangular streets, named after the Tamil months, surround the temple symbolize the structure of the cosmos and reveals the structure of lotus flower. Owing to its sacredness, the pond in this temple was named **Pottamaraaikulam** or Lotus pond. A metallic golden lotus that adorn the pond was donated by Thiruppanandal Adheenam.¹²

The four main outer gopurams of this temple, in four direction has grace of its own and stand as a monumental testimony to the artistic genius of hands that worked on it. All the outer **gopurams** of sky scraping pyramid structures has nine storeys and measures about 150 feet height each, and all of them were notable to have curved and concaved sloping sides. The east and west **gopurams** were built by Pandya Kings in the 13th centuries A.D. The south **gopuram** was built by Veerappa Nayak, the grandson of the great Visvanatha Nayak of Madurai in 1600 A.D. The successors of Visvanatha Nayak contributed lot to the Meenakshi temple in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹³ This temple underwent many changes peripherally and axially. The fine sculptures, paintings, marvelous architectural designs and impressive images available in this temple stand as a testimony to its ability, skill, taste and religious fervor. The **Chithirai** festival was celebrated with all pomp and pageantry for about fifteen days in the Tamil month of **Chithirai**. Music, dance, enactment of plays were performed in all these days. The magnificent procession of the deities through the streets around the temple, in order to give **darshan** or worship was observed amidst the thrill and joy of the devotees gathered.

Subramaniaswamy Temple – Tirupparankundram

Tirupparankundram, was one among the 14 **Shiva sthalams** in the Pandyan Kingdom and Sattan Ganapathi, the royal official of Pandyan Parantaka Nedunchadaiyan built this rock cut temple with a pond at Thirupparankundram in the 8th century A.D. The Nayaks of Madurai, beautified this temple with huge tower and extended its complexes to what it is today. The worship poses the sculpture of Thirumalai Nayak in front of the deity God Subramaniya reveals his holiness, way of worship and his veneration to religion.

The life portrait sculptures of Rani Mangammal and her grand son Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak were found in one of the pillars at **Asthana mandapam**, which was built by Rani Mangammal. Another sculpture of the celestial wedding of Lord Muruga with Deivayanai is the fine specimen of Nayaks art and it is the replica of the sculptures of celestial wedding of Goddess Meenakshi at **Kambathadi Mandapam** of the Meenakshi temple. This **Asthana Mandapam** served as choultry to feed the people and later it served as a military cantonment. The **Raya gopuram** of this temple is 150 feet height with seven stories. It was built by king Virappa Nayak. This tower consists of sculptures which depict the **puranic scenes**. Virappa Nayak also built high walls around this temple.¹⁴

The Prasanna Venkateswara Perumal Temple –Madurai

The Prasanna Venkateswara Perumal Temple was constructed exclusively for the Sourastras in 1644 A.D. and the presiding deity was Lord Krishna, the family deity of the Sourastras. This small temple with **garbagraha** and **artha mandapam** are the works of Thirumalai Nayak. But later it has been extended with several **mandapams** under the trusteeship of the Prasanna Venkateswara Swamy **Devasthanam Sabha** formed by the Sourastras in 1874 A.D.¹⁵

Rani Mangammal has also donated gifts such as pearl poojas, festivals and ornaments, lands and villages to this temple for its regular poojas, festivals and administration. She too regularly visited this temple and worshipped God Krishna and donated money to this temple. Rani Mangammal permitted the Sourastras to perform **Yajur Uppakarama** ceremony and festival, like the Brahmins in 1704 A.D. The Sourastras considered Tamil as *desa* language and gave importance to the folk art called **Kollatam Pasavann** performed in celebration by them on the next day of **Deepavali** a new moon day, every year.¹⁶

Aandal Temple – Srivilliputhur

Srivilliputhur, is beautified with the temple of God Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi in the name of Sri Aandal. Thirumalai Nayak constructed a huge **gopuram**, and carved a chariot or car made of wood to celebrate the car festival, in the Tamil month of **Aadi**, that too on the day of **pooram**, the birth star of Sri Andal. In order to chant the Holy hymns **Thiruppavai** was composed by Sri Aandal, in this temple, a trust called Sri Aandal charitable trust was arranged. Every year in the Tamil month of **Pankuni** on the full moon day, a wedding ceremony festival is celebrated at Aandal Temple, Srivilliputhur and on the same day the very same festival is celebrated at Alagar koil and Tirupparankundram temples due to the efforts of Thirumalai Nayak of Madurai.¹⁷

Nellaiyappar Temple – Tinnevely

Tinnevely was an important southern political centre of the Nayaks. Visvanatha Nayak improved the town of Tinnevely by erecting temples, opening streets and introducing irrigation schemes for the growth of agriculture. A fort was also constructed by him in 1626 A.D. and in 1646 A.D. There were several mandapams named Vasantha mandapam, Ayirankal mandapam, Somavara mandapam and Sangili mandapam or the Thousand pillared hall alias Thirukkalyana Vadamalaiyappa pillai. The minister of Thirumalai Nayak constructed this Thirukkalyana mandapam in 1647 A.D. A big car with stone wheels was also presented to this temple by him. During the Tamil month of Aipasi every year, festivals are celebrated in the Thousand pillard hall. Visvanatha Nayak gave a grant of twelve villages to this temple in 1560 A.D. Muthu Virppa Nayak I, also granted lands in 1610 A.D. Thirumalai Nayak too, granted lands in the villages of Thirumalasangamudram and Pudukkulam to the Brahmin priests of this temple in 1657 A.D. Muthu Virappa Nayak II, the son of Chokkanatha Nayak gave a grant of sale – deed to this temple. Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak gave a grant in 1700 A.D., to this temple. Mangammal gave a grant in 1706 A.D., to this temple, for regular conduct of **Poojas** and festivals. Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak, the pious Nayak king also gave a grant of land to this temple in 1715 A.D. Thus, due to the patronage of the Nayaks, this temple became a Saivaite pilgrim place in the south of Tamil country.¹⁸

Sri Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple – Koothiyarkundu

Koothiyarkundu is located about eight km from Madurai. It was the native place of Ramappaiyan, the famous **Dalavay** of Thirumalai Nayak. It was **Chadurvedi Mangalam** where Brahmins and folk artists lived more in population. As it was an area of **Koothadigal** or folk dancers, this place was

named Koothiyarkundu. Thirumalai Nayak constructed a temple for Meenakshi and Sundareswara or Chokkanatha. In this Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, a life size sculpture of Thirumalai Nayak and his Dalavay Ramappaiyan were found in the pillars of front **mandapam**. The **Vilva tree** is the **Stala Vriksha**. This temple had a tower and flag post or **dwajastamba**.¹⁹ **Chithirai** festival is celebrated in a grand manner. Still daily **poojas** and special **poojas** are performed during **Pirathosa** days twice a month during festivals, like **Navarathiri**, **Markali Nonbu** and **Sivarathiri**, the people around the villages of Koothiyarkundu visit and worship Gods. Thirumalai Nayak has given his patronage by creating hamlets in this town which was called **Koothiyarkundu**.

The Nayak kings revived the traditional festivals of the temples such as **Chithirai Thiruvila**, **Vaikasi Visakam**, **Aani unjal**, **Adi puram**, **Avani vasantham**, **Puratasi Navarathri**, **Iyppasi Deepavali**, **Karthigai theepam**, **Markali Vaikarai**, **Thai Pongal**, **Tai Poosam**, **Masi Sivarathiri** and **Pankuni Uthiram**. Besides these annual festivals, which fall on every Tamil month, with the total of 12 festivals, there were special celebrations called **Ekadesi**, **Karthikai**, **Piradosham**, **Ammavasi** or new moon day and **Pournami** or full moon day and during these festivals, special poojas were conducted, in almost all temples, either Vaisnavaites or Saivaites section. In order to perform regular **Poojas**, endowments were made by kings and chieftains of the Nayak period. Thane Konneriyappa, created an endowment trust for Meenakshi Temple in his name and donated lands for the trust, in the villages of Virattipattu and Achampattu in Madurai.²⁰

Through religious festivals, social harmony was brought among all sections of the society, namely, Brahmanas, Vellalars, Nayaks, Kallars, Sourastras, Pillans and others. They have their own **mandapams** to receive God Vishnu on the full- moon day of the Tamil month of **Chithirai**, every year during the **Chithirai Thiruvila**. The festivals of the Nayak period had more cultural values besides religious importance. Their treasury, with stable income enhanced the economy of the people, who could afford to spend money in celebrating festivals. The economic condition of the Nayak age enabled both the ruler and the ruled to spend their money and time for festivals with interests and happiness. Almost all the festivals of the temples, were arranged on full moon days, so that, the rural folk and the people from far off places made their journey easily, to reach the destination of the festivals in moon light. Example, **Chithirai** festivals, **Thai poosam** festival, **Visakam** festival and **Karthikai** festival were all celebrated only on full – moon days and it was easy and convenient for the people to throng and float in the Temples.

The festivals of the Nayak age promoted political and social unity. Festivals like **Chithirai** and **Navarathiri** festivals were celebrated in all the temple of the Kingdom on the same day.²¹ Temple festivals served as custodians of religious traditions and faiths, which were inherited and exchanged to the succeeding generations of the people of the land. Several towns and cities became the radiating centres of Saivism and Vaishnavism and they were very popular among people, at times of festivals, especially, Madurai, Palani, Srivilliputhur, Srirangam and Thirupparankundram.

Temples, their activities and festivals, provided employment opportunities to many section of the society, such as tailors, flower garland makers, sculptors, painters, carpenters, gold smiths, weavers, palanquin lifters, musicians, dancers, securities, gardeners and scavengers etc. Some of them had regular employments and few others had works at specific times of festivals and celebrations.

The temples and festivals played a significant and vital role in the social life of the people. When temples served as the citadals of culture, festivals helped in creating peaceful entertainments. The society of the Nayak age and the festivals were inseparable. The English word “ festival” is related to the word “feast” and so both of these words mean joy, solemnity and holiday. As Shiva and Vishnu worship was common during the Nayak age, all festivals were celebrated with great enthusiasm and happiness. Moreover the religious festivals served as a link for the betterment of

relationship among the people. Temples retained their importance and gained popularity throughout the Nayak age, because festivals were celebrated with pomp and glory, for achieving the good will of the people.²²

End Notes

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