

THIRUMALAI NAYAK: AN ICON OF HINDU BAKTHI REVIVALISM

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Hinduism, as we have noted elsewhere too, was the religion of the Vijayanagar rulers whose cultural commitment was to promote that religion to reclaim it from the ravages it was subjected to under Islamic rule. Most of the Vijayanagar rulers were devoted to Vaishnavism, and the Nayaks were also mainly Vaishnavite, but there is no proof that the other Hindu sects were affected with any disability on that score. They built Saiva as well as Vaishnava temples and equally well endowed them. It was during this period the Schism among the Vaishnavas – Vadakalai and Tenkalai – developed, culminating in the teachings of the Tenkalai Acharya Manavala Mamunigal (late 14th century) who derived his inspiration from Pillai Lokacharya on the 13th century. This Tenkalai tradition with its denominational and doctrinal differences from the other school (the Vadakalai) has been more Catholic and less orthodox and helped in universalizing Vaishnavism.

Celebration of Festivals

Temples are not only a place of religious interest, but they are cultural, social, political, and economic institutions also. Worshipping gods in temples infuses divinity and purity in the heart of the devotees. A temple festival was an occasion of great social rejoicing, and people gathered from in surrounding towns and village to participate in the general merriment. Thirumalai Nayak raised funds by abandoning the celebration of festivals, and he ordered that one-fourth of the total budget must be spent on temple construction. He made arrangements for the conduct of four major festivals and other minor festivals in a year by consulting Nilakanada Dikshitar, his minister and an expert in Sastras and other Sthanikars.

a) Chithirai Festival

Of all the festivals conducted in Madurai, the Chithirai festival is the greatest. Before Thirumalai Nayak's period the marriage celebration of Meenakshi and the Car festival were celebrated in the month of Masi. The streets, where the procession of the deities in the temple car perambulated was in Masi streets. Thirumalai Nayak shifted the Masi festival to the month of Chithirai. The reason for this change is stated to be that the month of Masi happened to be a harvest season when farmers are busy. To avoid the problem of poor response from the people to conduct the Chithirai festival, to suit the needs of the perambulating deities and Vahanas, the streets were widened. The Chithirai streets used for the Chithirai festival has given up its claim from the days of Thirumalai Nayak, who shifted

the perambulation to Masi streets and whenever the deity went through it, he offered as an incentive of 1000 gold coins. The Masi streets were widened at the time of Car festival.

The main festival was Thirukkalyanam celebrated for ten days and concluding with the big car festival. On the eighth day is celebrated the coronation of Meenakshi Amman. Till the year 1622 AD it was the custom for the kings to place the scepter before their family deity and take it from there. But during the reign of Thirumalai Nayak change was made in this coronation festival. The Sthanikars handed over the scepter to Thirumalai Nayak which was brought by him in a procession from the place to the temple.

Before his time it was a custom that Kallalagar of Thirumalirunjcholai had come up to Thenur, near Paravai on the full moon day of Chithirai to bless the Manduka Maharishi. Thirumalai Nayak changed the Alagar halt from Thenur Mandapam to Vandiyur near Madurai. It would have been an attempt to synchronize both the festivals of the Madurai Temple and the Alagar to create good impact.

The Meenakshi temple is the geographic and ritual center of the ancient city Madurai. The temple walls, the city streets were built first. Then the city walls were built around the temple in concentric squares. This physical expansion from the century was shifted as a ritual expansion binding the surrounding regions to the city. Paul Wheatley calls this process "Synoecism. This process subordinates the village deities and other equally powerful deities like the Alagar of Alagarkovil to the temple of the sacred center. The Chithirai festival is the best example of this ritual expansion process.

b) Vasantotsavam

Vasantotsavam was celebrated for ten days in the Tamil month of Vaikasi (May – June). This took place in the pudumandapam or Vasanta Mandapam. The mandapam is said to have been built as a delightful retreat for the idol Sundara-Linga for ten days in the hot month of May. And to have been distinguished by the epithet Vasanta (spring) in consequence. Thirumalai Nayakar built the Pudu Mandapam between 1628 and 1635 to celebrate the Vasantha festival.

The Pankuni festival is a Kodai Vasantam. The deities originally on a concluding day visited Tiruppuvanam twelve miles from Madurai. The deities returned the same night to the temple, in keeping with the age-old tradition that "Chokkar rath- thangar" which meant that the Utsava Chokkar never stayed out of the temple during the night. During the days of Thirumalai Nayak, Vaigai was in floods and once the deity could not be brought back to the temple to be in keeping with the tradition. Thirumalai Nayak announced a special reward to those who dared to bring the deity to Madurai despite the devastating flood when this feat was accomplished by a group of villagers. He donated a village called Saminatham to them. To avoid this contingency from then on, on the tenth day Chokkar visited the Thiruvapputaiyyar temple on the northern banks of the river Vaigai at Madurai

c) Avani Moola Festival

Many incidents from the Thiruvilaiyadal legends are portrayed during the different days of the festival. These culminate with the Pittukku Man Sumanda leelai in the Pittuthoppu when the king himself took part in the festival and acted as Pandyan King.

d) Teppotsavam Festival

Teppam is the Tamil equivalent 'float,' and Teppotsavam is the festival of the 'float: In most of the temples of the South particularly in Tamil Nadu, the float mark the conclusion of the prime annual temple festival and it is celebrated with as much as pomp and éclat as the Brahmotsavam. The month of Thai is in the sign of Capricorn (Maharam). The natal star of Thirumalai Nayak is pusam of this month and the monarch, to perpetuate its memory arranged the Teppotsavam festival and for this purpose he Constructed the lovely tank called the Mariamman Teppakulam, about 3 km to the east of Madurai in 1635. It measures 345 meter by 290 meters and has stone steps flanked by animal and bird balustrades leading down to the water in the middle of each side. A sixteen -columned pavilion with a pyramidal tower stands on an island at the center; it is capped with a kuta roof. Portrait sculptures adorn the four central columns; slabs cut into the shape of arched openings are placed in between smaller but similar pavilions mark the islands four corners. He donated Thidian Puttur, a village to celebrate the float festival. He appointed Poovantha pandaram and peddhavaraiya Dhiksitar, his Guru to supervise the temple activities.

A large size Vinayaka or Pillayar was unearthed at the time of digging the tank. This Mukkurani Pillayar was installed in the Southern Prakara of the Somasundar Shrine of the Meenakshi temple. A very large Kolukkattai is prepared with using 18 kg of rice flour, and distributed as sacrament. This system continues till today. Thirumalai nayak ordered the celebrations of other festivals like Navarathiri, Karthikai etc., and made Madurai, the city of festivals.

Nayanmars and Alwars

The Nayaks revived the Hindu Bakthi Movement after the **Nayanmars** and **Alwars**, through their religious activities the revival of rituals, festivals and renewal of Hindu morals, and philosophies. Humanism was given priority about religion. The Nayak kings were not at all aggressors but were only reformers, but, on the other hand, they were cruel in imposing law and order and also in collecting taxes. Such attitudes of the Nayaks enabled their subjects to be rule-oriented.

Thus, Thirumalai Nayak was the placed in history as the most illustrious ruler of Madurai Nayaks. He was a man of remarkable abilities. He had left an imperishable name in the history of Madurai. He was great alike in the fields of war, diplomacy, art and architecture. He had the capacity to rule various groups impartially.

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