

* *In the Kingdom of Nataraja, a guide to the temples, beliefs and people of Tamil Nadu*

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In the Kingdom of Nataraja

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Chantal Boulanger

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THANK YOU

Preface

It is a pleasure and honor to write the preface to the English edition of Chantal Boulanger's splendid guide to Tamil Nadu. Ms Boulanger brings to the work not only scholarly knowledge acquired by more than 10 years of study of South Indian culture but also a profound empathy with Hinduism, Dravidian culture, and the Tamil people. She has immersed herself in the rich ceremonial life of the great temples but knows as well the simple rites practiced at small local shrines. She has traveled widely in Tamil Nadu and probed deeply into the history and culture of the region.

Ms Boulanger has poured her knowledge and first-hand experience into her book, transforming a guide for visitors to Tamil Nadu into a fascinating, readable account of its history, geography, and culture. However, she has not forgotten the practical concerns of travelers, and the book abounds in information about hotels, transport, and convenient day-long trips from the major centers. She drops numerous tips on how to be a considerate visitor and to realize delicate plans, such as entry into the deepest recesses of temples. Moreover, she suggests ways to prepare mentally for what can be a profound experience of self-discovery.

Ms Boulanger understands India and the West. No one can better lead you on a voyage of discovery of an ancient civilization and also of what it means to be human.

Dr. Stanley A. Freed
Curator, Department of Anthropology
American Museum of Natural History, New York

1. Introduction



A. Unexplored India...

On a sunny day of August 1980 I arrived in Rameshvaram by boat. It was almost by chance, and I knew nothing of Tamil Nadu or even that there was a Dravidian civilization. I thought then I knew Indian culture. I had read many of the Hindu holy books translated from Sanscrit. I had dreamt of yogis meditating on the bank of the Ganges, yet, here I was, walking in India for the first time in the enormous halls of a Dravidian temple. In my soul, God stopped meditating in the Himalayas and started dancing in the rice-fields of Kanchipuram.

Since then, I have visited most of India, but my heart remained in Tamil Nadu where I have discovered a fascinating and mostly unexplored culture. I have learned Tamil and studied Dravidian beliefs. I have found another Hinduism, which names God "Nataraja" --the Dancing King.



Few are those who have heard about the majestic beauty of the Tanjore temple or the mystery of Chidambaram. Although there are more ancient temples and wonders in Tamil Nadu than in any other

Indian state, rare are those who know about it or visit it. Two factors explain this exceptional cultural wealth: most of Tamil Nadu was spared from Muslim invasions and, more importantly, this country was the cradle of the ancient Dravidian civilization.

This book is intended to be an introduction to Dravidian civilization and a field guide to help you discover it. It was not really written for the neophyte, and it presupposes a certain knowledge of northern India and Sanskrit culture. It is an invitation to travel, meant for an adventurous spirit, leading to other places and other books.

I didn't set out to write yet another tourist guide, and this book does not emphasize archaeological details and practical information. You should complement this book with others, according to your own interests. I love temples because they are vibrant with the rituals of men, the Divine shining everywhere and with deeply-lived beliefs. In them you will find the unexplored, forbidden India which fascinates me. If this is indeed what you want to discover, you will find here the keys to unique experiences.

At first I will sketch the history and geography of South India, then I will concentrate on smaller regions, especially the town of Kanchipuram (for history) and the provinces of Tondaimandalam and Chola Nadu (for "tourism"). You should realize that the extraordinarily rich culture of the Dravidian country cannot be understood easily in its entirety. By studying here a few "trees", we will be able to better appreciate "the forest".

The section on religion is just a sketch, an attempt to make you understand Hinduism a little better. There are thousands of books on this subject and none of them really manage to cover it fully. Hinduism consists of emotions and sensations; this book simply aims at giving you hints to help you experience them.

My goal is not to write an introduction to "westernized Hinduism" with its literary speculations, its sectarian excesses, and its frozen conceptions drawn from texts most Indians ignore. Tamils are rarely sectarian or dogmatic; their beliefs impregnate every part of their lives and come from the depths of their being and history. The pongal, the most popular Dravidian ritual, is a "boiling-over", a symbol of life and fertility, and a way to thank the Divine Energy which swallowed their ancestors for millennia. Here the pot contains the Energy, it means the over-flowing plenitude rather than the void.

B. Transliterations

Many words used in this book come either from Tamil or Sanscrit. These two languages, which are very different from each other, have letters which are impossible to write with our alphabet. They have “retroflex” consonants which require complicated exercises of the tongue to pronounce, and long vowels sometimes indicated with this accent: ^ . Tamil also has a letter which sounds like a mixture of “l”, “r” and “j” (sometimes written as “zh”) and is found only in Dravidian languages.

To render these letters correctly using the Roman alphabet, linguists have created conventions and special signs used in scientific publications. For the purpose of simplicity, I didn’t use them here. Most of the time, I didn’t even indicate long vowels, and I tried to write in such a way that by reading the Indian words aloud, you would have a chance to be understood.

Since this book was mostly conceived as an initiation and English is fluently spoken in Tamil Nadu, I chose the simplest transliterations. Therefore you will notice a slight difference between my terms and those used in the quotations, which often come from more scholarly books.

Regarding the names of the gods, I used their most common English spelling, derived from the Sanscrit. For the God “Shiva” I preferred “Siva”, which is the transliteration of the Tamil, and corresponds more closely to the way it is actually pronounced. I have come to the conclusion that unlike the other gods’ names, “Siva” comes from Tamil where it means red, rather than from the Sanscrit “Shiva” meaning compassion. Historically, this God appeared in a variety of forms always made of red fire long before he became famous for his compassion (see B.2 of Chapter 3).

C. The Context

C1. South India

The word “Deccan”, which means South India, comes from “dakshina”, “south” in Sanscrit. It designates everything south of the Vindhya Mountains which follow almost exactly the tropic of Cancer,

north of Maharashtra and Orissa (Bombay-Calcutta). These mountains prohibit to some extent communications between the northern plains and the peninsula of India.

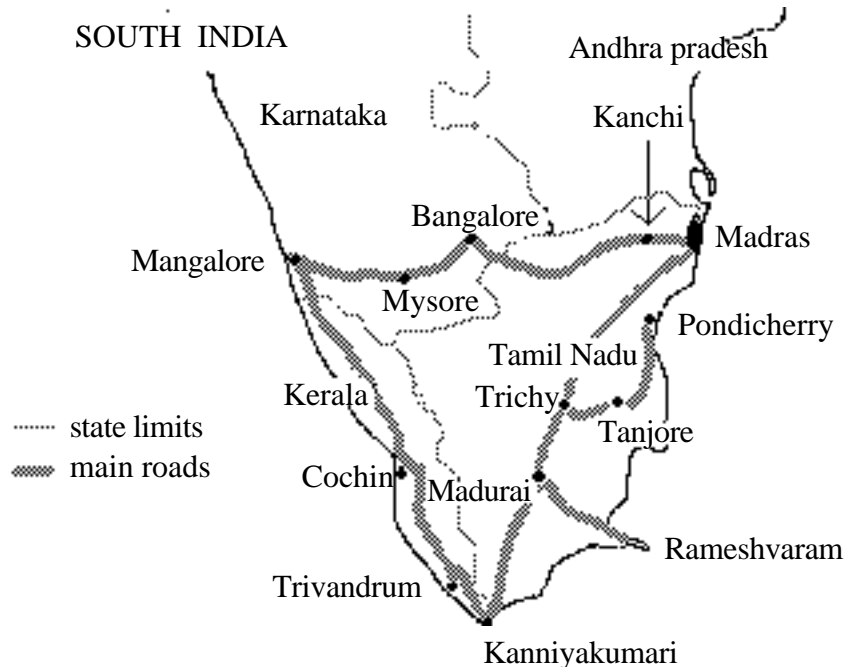
The Deccan is essentially composed of a plateau descending towards the sea by mountainous steps called “Ghats”, meaning steps in Sanscrit. The Western Ghats are formed by a chain of mountains rising towards the south (around 9000 feet in the Nilgiris region). The Eastern Ghats descend slowly and give way to a plain in the south.

The people of the Deccan have no strongly marked racial characteristics; they are obviously the result of a *mélange* which dates back to the earliest antiquity. Anthropologically speaking, we find in them Negrito, Proto-Australoid, but mostly Proto-Mediterranean and Armenoid elements, especially in the more developed sites.

South India has traces of human habitation dating back 300 000 years. The first stage of human development is the Paleolithic, which lasted a very long time. It was followed by the “Microlithic”, which is characterized by very small stone implements, dating back to 8000 B.C. This stage of evolutionary development differs substantially from that of Europe. Around 3000 B.C. pottery appears, but there are no signs of agricultural development. From 2000 B.C., we notice the influence of the Indus Valley civilization, but in a degenerated form and only in pottery.

C2. The origins

The Aryans conquered the plains of North India about 1500 B.C., but they stopped at the Vindhya Mountains. There was little contact with the inhabitants of the South until 600 B.C. When the Deccan people are mentioned in the most ancient Sanscrit texts, it is only very vaguely or to condemn customs that were considered improper.



In the south of the Deccan, especially in Tamil Nadu, a Megalithic civilization developed (1200 B.C.), which has been poorly researched, but was characterized by tombs with urns and sarcophagi. These sites also contain pottery and objects made of iron, gold and brass; this period is also the beginning of the cultivation of rice. The people of this civilization were very similar culturally to the people of the ancient Near-East, and they don't seem to have evolved from the tribes of the Paleolithic or Microlithic Ages, but most probably arrived by sea.

In all probability, these people originated the Dravidian civilization. The Dravidians are distinguished by their language, which is either Tamil or is derived from it, and by a special cultural outlook, which I will describe later. They occupy the southern-most region of the Deccan, essentially the modern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. We also find them in Orissa and certain parts of Bengal and Bihar, probably descendants from tribes who would have emigrated towards the northeast. What leads us to believe that the Megalithic people were the Dravidians is that we discovered at the site of Adichanallur (Tirunelveli district, south of Madurai) religious symbols still used today in the worship of Muruga, the Dravidian God par excellence.

There are many similarities between the first inhabitants of the Near-East (Sumerians, Elamites) and the ancient Dravidians, for instance :

- inheritance through women
- an annual marriage ritual of the Goddess and a lunar god, who are considered the real sovereigns
- a martial Goddess riding a lion
- an institution of priestesses who are also dancers and who enjoy great sexual freedom.

We will examine some of these issues later in more detail. In the Nilgiris, we also discovered vases bearing an astonishing resemblance to other vases found in Ur (Mesopotamia). We know that since earliest antiquity, there was intense trading between the people of the Mediterranean and the Deccan (spices, precious woods, pearls and cotton were imported from South India to the Mediterranean countries). The Indian words that were “exported” with the merchandise about 1000 B.C. were of Dravidian origin, like the word rice which comes from the Tamil “arici”. On the other hand, we also have proof that the Dravidians travelled to Southeast Asia as early as prehistoric times.

Some people think that the Dravidians could be the descendants of the inhabitants of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, who would have fled to the south. We don’t know enough about the Indus Valley civilization to confirm this theory. However, the great similarities between the beliefs of the Mesopotamians and the Dravidians seem to indicate a more direct link. We should also stress the fact that all pre-Aryan societies in that part of the world were influenced by the ancient cultures of the Near-East, and it is difficult to know which influences came directly by sea or through a long journey by land.

It is also practically certain that the Dravidians assimilated the cultures of the earliest tribes of India. It is thought that totem veneration, which is still very much practiced today, originated with these early inhabitants; for example, the worship of cobras is still common among some tribes (the Nagas). If human sacrifice was ever practiced, it would have been such an inherited custom; but if it did exist, it has been forgotten for two millennia.

Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that isolated tribes speaking Dravidian dialects are to be found throughout the Deccan, in east-central India and even in the western mountains of Pakistan. Certain passages in the Rig Veda, the most ancient Aryan text, suggest that they were aware of Dravidian beliefs. It is probable that the Dravidians either occupied the whole territory of India in pre-Aryan times, or that Dravidian tribes swarmed to the north from their original territory.

This may explain why, despite a strong Aryan influence, Hinduism as it is practiced by the people today is more Dravidian than Vedic.

C3. The Sangam period

From the fourth century B.C. we can establish with certainty the existence of the Pandya, Chola and Kerala (Chera) dynasties which formed a relatively stable political structure, based on an interplay of alliances. The Pandya kingdom and its dynasty chosen by the Goddess, who became a queen, is mentioned in Sanscrit texts of the fifth century B.C., by Megasthenes (third century B.C.), in the “silappadikaram”, a Tamil poetical novel from the second century A.D., and then by numerous authors, notably by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century. Remarkably, it is always described as having the same political structure and remains famous for the beauty of the pearls it exports.

The Mauryan Empire (third century B.C.) expanded to include all of North India and a great part of the Deccan, developing along the merchant routes already established between the North and the well-organized kingdoms of the South. Emperor Ashoka might have gone down as far as Kanchipuram. He is mentioned in one inscription as being the first king of this city, which would explain why it became a great Buddhist center, and remained famous as one until the seventh century A.D. The son of Ashoka traveled to Sri Lanka but, as all the emperors of the Mauryan dynasty, he respected the Dravidian kingdoms (Chola, Pandya and Chera).

Archaeologists found inscriptions dating from that time in “Damili”, a mixture of Brahmi (the most ancient North Indian writing) and Tamil. It is interesting to notice that those inscriptions do not have vowels in the words. Some of them contain letters from the Tamil alphabet used to translate sounds impossible to render in Brahmi, which indicates that this alphabet already existed, although it was never engraved on stone.

After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, North Indian dynasties conquered most of the Deccan, although they never succeeded in invading the three Dravidian kingdoms. They brought with them Sanscrit and Brahmins and they exerted a tremendous cultural influence. Very quickly, even in the South, the inscriptions (on copper plates) were all in Sanscrit, most often registering gifts of land to Brahmins.

Written at the beginning of the Christian era, a large anthology of poems referred to as the “from the Sangam” evokes the life in the

three kingdoms, especially that of the city of Madurai, where was held the assembly of poets, the “Sangam”. Although written in Tamil, we already begin to detect a Sanscrit influence which will only grow in the later centuries. The authors of those texts are almost all known and among them were women, including the very famous poetess Auvaiyar. Despite the Sanscrit influence, which is minimal in the early poems, it is where we find what remains of Dravidian culture in its purest state.

These texts describe three prosperous kingdoms in which the kings spend their time conquering each others’ towns. Poetry, dance and religion were held in high esteem. The most popular religion was the non-orthodox Dravidian beliefs on which we will dwell later in detail. In addition, we find Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism, all of which came from North India and were in fashion at that time. The last poems from the Sangam anthology were written at the end of the third century of our era.

In these poems, women, although subordinate to men, were considered the pillars of society: the fate of the family and the kingdom depended on their good behavior. The sovereign never held audience without being accompanied by his queen. His personal guard was composed of women warriors. The marriage ceremony was simple, celebrated under a canopy by tying a string around the bride’s neck. The ideal for a man was to die on the field of battle and for the spouse to immolate herself on a pyre (Dravidian custom). Men and women who died in this manner achieved divinity. The ideal of this society was rather Spartan. It was said, “The Dravidians loved life and worshipped death”.

Love of life, dance, music, and all other pleasures were described with empathy in these poems. This was most probably due to the prosperity of the country, especially of the towns, which enjoyed a lucrative trade with the Romans through Egypt.

Here is a small quotation from the Tiru Kural, the most famous work of the Sangam, which shows some of the spirit of these times, and somehow renders the ornate style Tamils love to use:

“In sweet simplicity,
A woman's gracious form hath she;
But yet those eyes, that drink my life,
Are with the form at strife!
The light that on me gleams,
Is it death's dart? or eye's bright beams?”

Or fawn's shy glance? All three appear
In form of maiden here.
If cruel eye-brow's bow,
Unbent, would veil those glances now;
The shafts that wound this trembling heart
Her eyes no more would dart.
As veil o'er angry eyes
Of raging elephant that lies,
The silken cincture's folds invest
This maiden's panting breast.
Ah! woe is me! my might,
That awed my foemen in the fight,
By lustre of that beaming brow
Borne down, lies broken now!"

(Robinson and Pope, 1977, p 223)

C4. The rest of the history...

After this period, the Dravidian land endured three centuries under the oppressive rule of the evil Kalabhra dynasty. They eliminated the Cholas and reduced the influence of the Pandyas and Cheras. The texts of that time prefer to evoke the golden age of the Sangam. Buddhism and Jainism became dominant and the fun-loving spirit of the early times disappeared forever.

In the sixth century A.D., the Cholas have disappeared and another dynasty has taken their place, the Pallavas, whose origin is unknown. They reigned over the region containing Madras and Kanchipuram from the third to the eighth century. With the Pandyas and the Cheras, they spent their time fighting for the largest share of South India. They also waged war against the dynasties of northern Deccan. Although the Dravidian civilization lost some of its distinguishing characteristics and became diluted by Sanskrit culture, it expanded tremendously. Hinduism as we know it today took form, a mixture of Dravidian and Aryan elements which became common throughout India (Buddhism and Jainism almost disappeared by the eighth century).

The second golden age of the Tamil country arrived with the reappearance of the Cholas from the ninth to the twelfth century. The Pallavas had been eliminated, and there was an apparent return to the golden age of the Sangam period, but the spirit was very different. The

kings of that time vied with each other through culture rather than through war, building grandiose temples, sponsoring the writing of dogmatic texts on Hinduism and developing religious arts (whereas the Sangam kings encouraged worship of themselves). The culture was also “exported” to Southeast Asia by the imperialist Cholas kings.

The dynasties of the Deccan were spending their time fighting with each other, but it did not hinder the building of temples nor the prosperous development of the land. The conquests did not affect the political structure of towns and villages, or the local dynasties of lords (Kanchipuram changed hands on an average of every thirty years during that time, while continuing to be very prosperous).

As early as the eighth century, Muslims began invading North India and persecuting Hindu culture. The Deccan was invaded in the early thirteenth century by the Sultan of Delhi. At the start of the fourteenth century, the Hindu kings of the South formed a coalition to drive the Muslims out of South India. They were successful except for the north of the Deccan and the Sultanate of Madurai. Then two Hindu princes who had been forced to convert to Islam reverted to Hinduism, created the empire of Vijayanagar, uniting all the small southern Hindu kingdoms, and formed a powerful state which protected the South until the seventeenth century.

From the seventeenth century, Muslims, Hindu kings, the Portuguese, the French, and most prominently the British were all vying for control of this land of wealth, either through war or through cunning alliances. The Hindu kings were to become Maharajahs, shifting from being Lords to landlords. The Portuguese kept Goa and the French, five settlements. As for the British, they became the masters of India until 1947.

C5. Village life

Throughout India’s history, invasions and political turmoil did not much affect everyday life, since it was more dependent on the organization of the village than on that of the the kingdom. Taxes which were due to the king, whoever he was, were a sixth of the harvest, in principle (there were also custom duties which were collected directly by the king in port cities). Apart from tax collection, only justice at a higher level and “foreign policy” were directly administered by the king. The society was divided into castes, sects, guilds and villages, and it was through these structures that daily life was administered.

There were, and still are, three types of villages: the “ûr”, a complex town with farmers and craftsmen which is an autonomous whole, the “sabhâ”, a village of Brahmins, and the “nagaram”, a city where merchant and warrior castes are dominant. The “cheri” is a hamlet in which all the inhabitants are of the same caste, usually “untouchable”.

In the past, the village people would meet more or less formally under a sacred tree and, although majority vote was known, usually made decisions unanimously. The village or the caste was ruled by an assembly which was ideally composed of five “sages” the “panchayat”. There was a great interdependency between the villagers, who exchanged services and goods according to precise rules which limited monetary exchanges to a minimum.

To this day, the majority of Indian people live in villages in which traditional structures often remain. Tamils are very attached to this way of life, as we can see from so many recent movies tenderly depicting village traditions and customs. Farmers who buy a tractor do not get rid of their bullocks, for whom they often have a genuine affection.

Once a year, on the 15th of January, all the Tamil villages come alive with the celebration of the great “harvest” festival, the “pongal” (over-flowing). The first day, the land-owning castes start the rituals in their homes by thanking the earth, the plants and the sun, all of which gave them good harvests. The apex of the ceremony is the cooking of a rice dish which is made to boil until it overflows. They also make offerings of new clothes, always in cotton (cotton originally comes from South India), and they thank the family’s cow.

The next day castes of laborers perform the same rituals in their houses, and there is an additional ceremony for their cattle. After thanking their cows, they decorate the bullocks with balloons and tassels, paint their horns and give them “medicinal” plants. Finally the bullocks are paraded all together. As the sun sets, the country lanes liven up with thousands of brightly colored teams adorned with balloons and ribbons, and smiling, gaudily attired farmers.

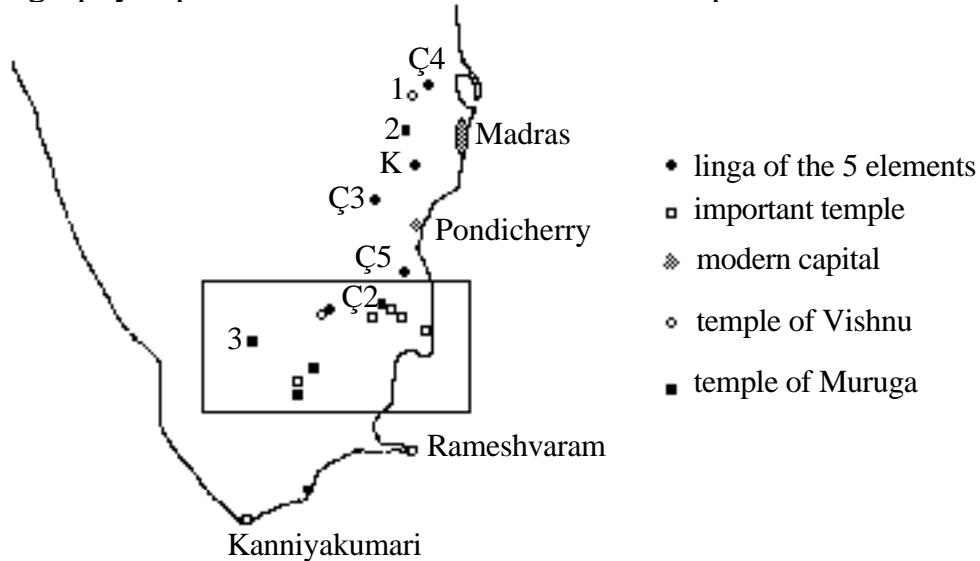
The ritual of pongal, which is also done year-round for local or family reasons, is a celebration of life, of deified ancestors, of good harvests, of victory... When you understand its deeper meaning, you open yourself to village Hinduism, which is simple and far removed from speculative metaphysics. It is based on the rhythm of the seasons, fertility, and a world pregnant with divinity.

2. Time and Space : Kanchipuram

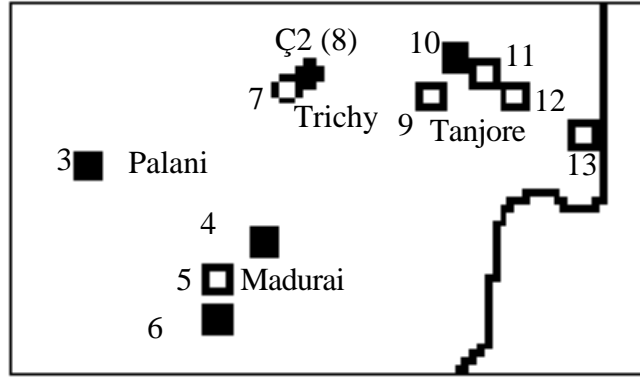


A. Geographical context

Tamil Nadu, together with a little stretch of Andhra Pradesh, contains a certain number of important temples which form a cultural whole. Although Rameshvaram and Kaniyakumari are of pan-Indian relevance, most of the cities mentioned here are part of the “sacred geography” specific to Tamil culture. These temples are:



Enlargement of the framed area, the Tanjore region :



Five linga (symbol of Siva) representing the five elements (K + C2 to C5 on the following plan), six temples dedicated to Muruga (the preferred form of God for Tamils - 2, 3, 4, 6, 10 and 14), eight temples representing the planets (1, 3, 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, C4), two very large centers of Vaishnava (worshipping Vishnu) pilgrimage (1 and 7), the temple of Madurai (5), the temple of Tanjore (9) and the city of Kumbakonam (11).

The five linga representing the five elements (pañca bhūta sthala) are:

- EARTH (prithvi) = Kanchipuram (K)
- WATER (ap) = Tiruvannaikkavu (C2 - 8 is Trichy)
- FIRE (jyotir) = Tiruvannamalai (C3)
- AIR (vayu) = Kalahasti (C4)
- SPACE (akasha) = Chidambaram (C5)

The six temples called “houses of Muruga” (arupadai vidu) are :

Tirupparankundram (6), Tiruchendur (14), Palani (3), Swamimalai (10), Tiruttani (2), Palamudircholai (4). Notice that the names of all these temples are in Tamil and not in Sanscrit, that two of those temples (4 and 6) are close to Madurai (5 - the capital of the Pandya kingdom), and that three others are not very far from it (3, 10, 14).

The eight temples of the nine planets (two planets are in the same temple - nava graha sthala) are :

- SUN (surya) = Suryanarcoil (12)
- MOON (candra) = Tirupati (1)
- MARS (angara) = Palani (3)
- MERCURY (budha) = Madurai (5)
- JUPITER (brihaspati) = Tiruchendur (14)
- VENUS (sukra) = Srirangam (7)
- SATURN (sani) = Tirunallaru (13)

“rahu”(a sort of demon who swallows the moon and the sun: the eclipse) and “ketu”(any comet; he brings back light and the moon) = Kalahasti (C4)

Thus, we clearly see that these temples delineate a territory, a land which is religiously self-contained. I also added to the map: Tanjore (9), which gives its name to a whole region and Kumbakonam (11), a famous Saiva (worshipping Siva) town where a festival famous all over India, the “kumbha mela” is celebrated every twelve years. I also marked the two most well-known Vaishnava temples, Srirangam (7) and Tirupati (1), which are important pilgrimage centers.

These towns, as well as many others situated in these regions, are the elements of a “circuit of pilgrimage” followed at least since the sixth century by numerous devotees, especially the great saints-poets who composed the songs of the “tevaram”. This anthology beautifully describes their travels and sings the glory of all the visited temples.

Kanchipuram finds its place within this complex of temples which form the visible framework of Tamil Saivism. It is the city of the linga representing the earth element. It was, and still is to a certain extent, an important landmark in the north-south axis of these pilgrimages (from Tirupati or Kalahasti to Chidambaram and the Tanjore region).

Kanchi, as I will call it from now on, is situated about 50 miles southwest of Madras, on the road leading to Bangalore, in the state of Tamil Nadu. It is located in the middle of an alluvial plain, on the left shore of the Pâlar river and one of its small tributaries, the Vegavati.

The town is made of several distinct neighbourhoods, with the most ancient one, Siva-Kanchi, in the north. The others are Vishnu-Kanchi in the southeast, Gandhi Road (the merchants’ district) in the middle, Pillayar Pallaiyam (the cotton weaver’s district) in the southwest, and further in that direction, Jaina-Kanchi.

Kanchi lies in the middle of fertile rice fields, and is very famous for its cotton and silk weaving industry. Its prosperity is that of a traditional town preserving its balance, rather than that of a modern developing city.

B. History.

Kanchipuram was called “kanchiyûr” in the Sangam period, using the Tamil word “ûr” rather than the Sanscrit “pura”, both of which

mean “town”. Sometimes during the early medieval period it was also named “Kacci”. Both terms “kanchi” and “kacci” can be used as a name for the town, and they both probably evoke a woman’s belt or girdle.

The “Kanchipurana”, a Sanscrit text about the town’s legends, contains a verse explaining that the city corresponds to the navel of the Goddess, which is under her girdle (kanchi). It is also gives an etymology closer to Tamil, in which “ka” would mean “Kamalatton”, the Tamil name of Brahman, and Kanchi would be short for “kancita”, meaning “worshipped by Brahman”. The Kanchipurana even quotes Siva saying that he is “Ka”, the supreme being, and that he gave Kanchi its name because of the worship he received in this town.

Kanchi is frequently mentioned in Sangam poems, and is described as a very ancient town famous for its religious festivals, its worshipping crowds and sometimes the unbecoming gentleness of its ruler, the king of Tondai. It was the capital of the Tondaimandalam, the northeastern region of the Dravidian land.

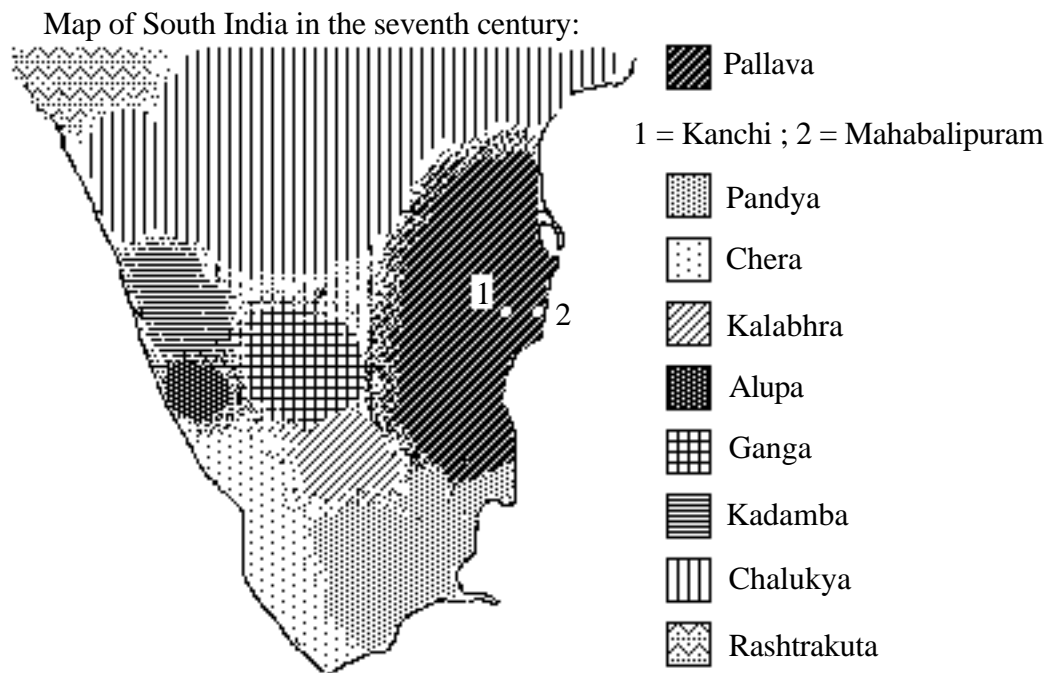
In the story of the Buddhist saint Manimekalai, most probably written at the end of the third century, Kanchi is described as a cosmopolitan city, inhabited by many diverse communities speaking eighteen languages, and already famous for its Buddhist temples. At that time, it was suffering from a period of drought and Manimekalai brought with her a bowl from which came an unlimited quantity of food. Kanchi regained its former glory and beauty, and the saints (Manimekalai and her guru Aravana Adigal) settled there to teach Buddhism. They both passed away in the city.

It is clear from this and other stories that Kanchi at that time was a welcoming, cosmopolitan town, and an important center for Buddhists (although Jains and Hindus were numerous too). In the seventh century, Hiuan-tsang, a Buddhist pilgrim, came to Kanchi and marveled at the many monasteries.

B1. The Pallavas

We know very little about Kanchi’s history before the sixth century A.D., when we begin finding inscriptions on the walls of the most ancient temples. The legend says that Ashoka, the Mauryan emperor, would have been the first king, establishing it as the Buddhist center that it certainly was. It is most probable that it later became part of the Chola kingdom, and after the destruction of Korkai, which was then the

oldest Chola capital, it might have been the capital of that kingdom for a while.



(N.B. This map and the following ones are only approximations. The names are those of the important dynasties of those times, and the space they cover corresponds to their “area of influence” rather than to their boundaries, which changed continually.)

In the middle of the second century, “Siva-Skandavarman of Kanchi” is said to have been the first king of a new dynasty whose origin is still a mystery, the Pallavas. Although these kings at first had a hard time keeping hold of the Tondaimandalam, from the fifth to the eighth century they became brilliant rulers, patrons of new arts, a dynasty who would forever leave their mark on Indian history. And to this day, they are still considered by Kanchi’s population to have been the only legitimate ruling family.

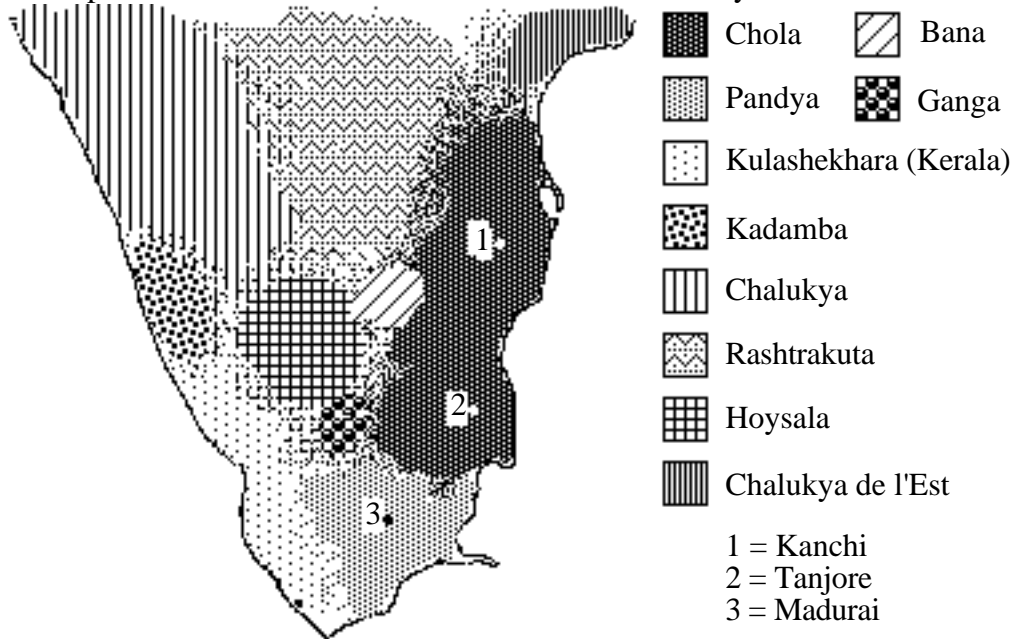
Under their rule Buddhism and Jainism almost disappeared, the first South Indian stone temples were built, and the first great saint-poets of Tamil Nadu found their inspiration in a renewed Hinduism.

The first Pallavas were mostly Jains and Buddhists, but in the beginning of the seventh century, Mahendravarman I, who was Jain, was converted to Sivaism by the great saint Appar, who himself had been the head of a Jain monastery before reconverting to Sivaism. This well-known episode marks the start of a new era for Hindu temples. Although the Pallavas had a harder time keeping hold of their kingdom, which was frequently invaded by neighbouring kings, during

the seventh and eighth centuries they built some of the most beautiful temples in the port town of Mahabalipuram and in Kanchi, notably the Kailasa Natar and the Airavateshvara.

B2. The desirable holy city

Map of South India from the tenth to the twelfth century:



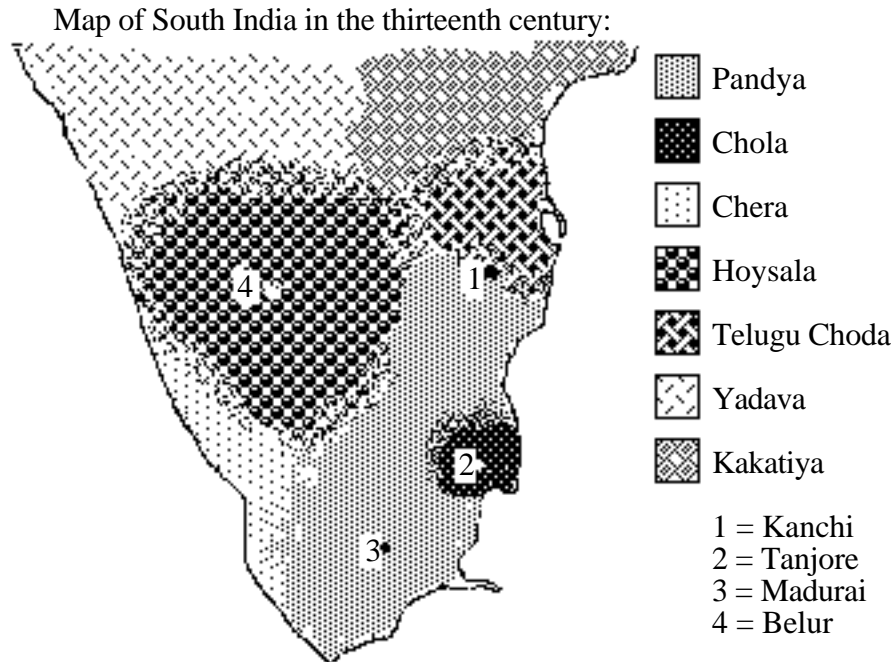
After having been the glorious capital of the Pallavas, especially in the seventh and eighth centuries, Kanchi remained until the fourteenth century an important city, the capital of the Tondaimandalam. Never again did a dynasty settle in its walls, but because of its prestige, it became a “second capital” for all the kings who conquered it. It was an important, desirable city, and all the Tamil dynasties vied for its control.

Throughout its history, Kanchi remained a town to be conquered. Kings from the south of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh wanted to be crowned there, and thus had to first invade it. Each of its invaders, instead of destroying it as he would have done with an ordinary town, respected it, embellished it, and gave to its Brahmins lands and privileges.

Until the Muslims arrived, this famous religious center was a city to be won in order to contribute to its greatness, and to be held until the next battle.

During the first half of the tenth century, the Chola kings decided to conquer “the North” and took Kanchi as their army base. These Saiva kings largely contributed to the prosperity of the town’s temples.

In 941, Kanchi was taken by a Rashtrakuta king, Krishna III, who remained there for about ten years. It was then invaded again by the Cholas, who did not show a great interest in it.



In 1052, it was conquered by the Eastern Chalukyas. These kings made alliances with the Cholas. In 1070 a Chalukya king, who had a Chola mother, usurped the Chola throne and took the name of Kulottunga Chola I. He was crowned in Kanchi, which became his secondary capital (1070 to 1118). He left numerous inscriptions on the walls of the main Siva temple, the Ekambara Natar, which bear witness to his great interest in it.

The successors of Kulottunga established themselves in the south of Tamil Nadu and deserted Kanchi, which was then taken by the Hoysala whose power was increasing at the time. An alliance between this dynasty and the Cholas resulted in Kanchi losing all its strategic importance, however, since it was on the road between these two kingdoms, it became a prosperous commercial city. It remained so until the end of the Chola Empire.

In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Cholas' power crumbled under the conquests of the Pandya dynasty. At that time, the Pandyas managed to enlarge their kingdom to cover almost all of Tamil Nadu. Kanchi was then at the borders of the kingdoms of the Pandya, Hoysala, Telugu Choda and Kakatiya. Small dynasties or local lords

vied for control of it. Many kings claimed to be its ruler, including a surprisingly reappearing Pallava, who called himself “master of Kanchi”.

The situation was extremely confusing, and the stability of the town relied on its local lords, the Sambhuvaraya, who kept it prosperous and prestigious. In the fourteenth century, after a short invasion of Malik-Kafur that followed the demise of the Kakatiya dynasty, they proclaimed themselves the kings of the city.

In 1361, Bukka II Vijayanagar conquered the town, which became part of that great South Indian empire...

B3. The Vijayanagar Empire

From the fourteenth century the kings of the Vijayanagar empire fought the Muslims successfully and restored Hindu worship and customs. They maintained South India’s traditional culture and, following the footsteps of the great Tamil dynasties, they built and embellished temples throughout the empire. Although they did not have a special interest in Kanchi, they contributed to its prosperity and architecture, as they did to all towns throughout their empire.

Krishna Devaraya (1509-1529) was the first Vijayanagar king to be interested in Kanchi. He was a very good king and his reign was marked by unprecedented calm and prosperity. In 1509, he ordered the construction of the Ekambara Natar’s monumental entrance tower (gopura). Throughout his life, he was very generous towards all the temples in Kanchi as well as to its population.

His successor, Achyutaraya, gave the control of Tamil Nadu to his general Chellappa Saluva Nayakkar, who was the son of the main priest of the Ekambara Natar. Chellappa naturally took Kanchi as his capital. He was a staunch Saiva and, disobeying his emperor who wanted Siva and Vishnu temples to be treated equally, he only gave funds to Siva temples.

In 1532, Chellappa rebelled against Achyutaraya, because he wanted to create an independent Tamil kingdom with Kanchi as its capital. Just before leaving for the battle against the emperor, he told his two wives, “I will come back victorious or I won’t come back at all. If at the end of this battle, you do not see me return, it will mean that I will be dead, and, since you are good spouses, you will throw yourselves into a fire.” He lost the battle, and on hearing the news his two wives threw themselves on a pyre. Achyutaraya had reconquered

Kanchi, and to celebrate the occasion, he made large gifts to Vishnu temples and took one of their priests, Tatacharya, as guru.

But Chellappa was not dead. He had been defeated by Achyutaraya who forced him to retreat to the kingdom of Travancore, in the southern most end of India. He remained there ten years before being pardoned and going back to Kanchi, where he discovered the sacrifice of his wives. Each year since that time, the descendants of Chellappa commemorate the death of these women and perpetuate the story of their unusual ancestor. Today, they are still priests of the Ekambara Natar and Kailasa Natar temples.

After this episode, the emperors of Vijayanagar again lost all interest in Kanchi. Towards the end of this great empire, a small dynasty of lords, the Nayakkars, took the opportunity given by the demise of the empire to assert themselves. They chose as gurus the descendants of Tatacharya, and ruled over a good part of Tamil Nadu. In 1570, they founded the Tirumala dynasty of (what remained of) the Vijayanagar Empire, whose northern part had been seized by the Muslims. Two kings of this dynasty were crowned in Kanchi, Pedda Venkata II (1630-1670) and Shriranga III (1642- 1670).

Kanchi remained under the rule of the Tirumalas until the eighteenth century, when it was incorporated into the British empire.

From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Kanchi had known only a few decades of glory, from 1509 to 1532, and then from 1630 to 1670. Nevertheless, since at the end of the fourteenth century it had become a commercial town rather than a strategic city, it didn't suffer from this lack of royal authority. We must take note that at all times during the Vijayanagar empire, it was administered by a local governor.

From the seventeenth century, Kanchi completely lost its administrative importance because of the rise of Vellore, which was an important military base during the Vijayanagar empire, and then the capital of a Nabob during the early British Empire. Finally, the British took Chingleput as the capital of the region in which Kanchi is situated.

Although it is no longer a capital, Kanchi is still an important town because of its industry and commerce, as well as being one of the seven most sacred cities in India. People come from all over the country to visit its famous monasteries, especially that of Shankaracharya which was founded by Shankara (acharya means master) the great philosopher-saint of the eighth century and which is where his spiritual descendants still live. Few of Kanchi's two hundred temples attract crowds, but the one of the Goddess Kamakshi certainly does. This

temple was used as a model for all the shrines dedicated to Siva's wife in Tamil Nadu.

The complex history of Kanchi demonstrates its historical importance in the life of South India, and explains why numerous castes claim to be the descendants of the "kings of Kanchi". Many of those families are probably the descendants of ancient dynasties of local lords.

C. The temples in the city of Kanchi

Legends says that Kanchi has one thousand temples, but today only two hundred of them can be identified. About fifty of them are consecrated to Siva, and the remaining belong to Saiva (belonging to Siva) deities: Vinayakar (Ganesha), Muruga (Skanda, Karttikai) and the Goddess, in other words, Siva's wife and two sons.

The most important Vaishnava temple, the Varadaraja Perumal, is at the extreme southwest end of the town, and is famous for its murals and a hall with one-hundred admirably sculptured pillars. The most ancient Vaishnava temple, the Vaikunta Perumal (seventh century), is situated in "Siva-Kanchi", where there are also two other temples dedicated to Vishnu: the Ulagalanda Perumal and the Pandavatuta Perumal.

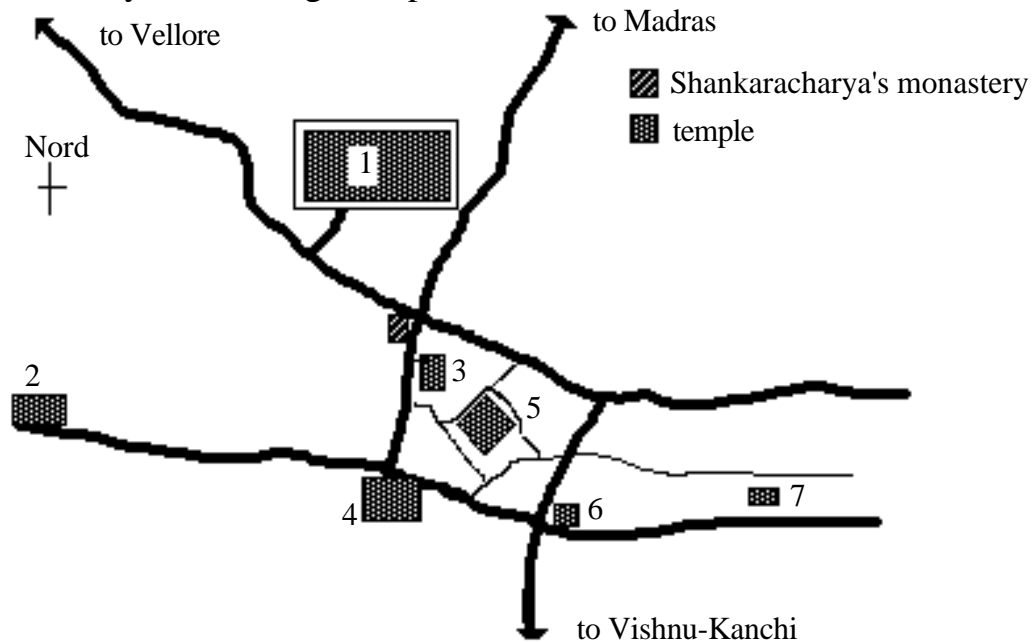
The temple that draws crowds to Kanchi is dedicated neither to Vishnu nor to Siva, but to the Goddess Kamakshi (the woman with desire in her eyes) also called Lalita (woman in love), a form of Siva's wife. This temple, called the Kamakkottam (the palace of desire), is unique in many ways. In every Siva temple in South India, the spouse-Goddess has her own separate shrine beside that of her husband's. But in Kanchi, no Siva temple contains a separate shrine for the Goddess, the linga (the symbols of Siva) represent by themselves the God and the Goddess together. Parvati is not conceived as apart from Siva, and in every temple of the city, the divine couple is represented at the back of the sanctum in low-relief with the form of Somaskanda, uniting Siva (Sa), Devi (Uma) and their "son" Muruga (Skanda).

The worship of the Goddess Kamakshi is certainly very ancient, and was most probably first done in the temple called Adi-Pitha-Parameshvari (the seat of the supreme and original Goddess), which is now situated by the side of the Kamakkottam, and where we can see very ancient "murti" (forms, statues of God). In Kamakshi's

temple itself, several statues date back to forgotten times and worships, showing the antiquity of the site.

I could not mention all the temples of Kanchi here, even if I limited myself to the Saiva temples. I will later write in greater detail about the Ekambara Natar, and mention a few others. Most of the temples probably existed at a very early time, but today their architecture usually dates back to the tenth century only. This does not mean they did not exist before, but simply that they were rebuilt at that time. Some temples of lesser importance still stand as they were built in the seventh century; the most famous are the Kailasa Natar (2 on the following map), the Vaikunta Perumal (7) and the Airavateshvara (6).

The majority of Kanchi's temples are very small, consisting of just a little sanctum surrounded by a wall. They often surround a small artificial pond, or stand near the main streets. Some are rich, those in which the merchant castes worship, and others are poor, sometimes as far as no longer having a roof. Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, puja (rituals through which the divine energy in the icon is renewed) are done in all of them, usually twice a day, and up to six times a day for the large temples.



Looking at this map, where I show only the main temples, we notice that the three most ancient temples (2, 6 and 7) are all situated on the same axis, which goes between an important Siva temple (the Kacchabeshvara, 4) and the Kamakkottam (5). 1 is the Ekambara Natar and 3 is the Kumarakkottam which is dedicated to Muruga. Thus

it may be that in ancient times if Siva-Kanchi was separate from Vishnu-Kanchi, the Kamakshi's temple was the center of the city.

D. Myths : Love and Destruction

The main temple dedicated to Siva, the Ekambara Natar, is famous for its legend of the wedding of the God and the Goddess. We will see that the divine couple is special in Kanchi. The Goddess is thought of as holding the symbol of her husband tightly in her arms, whose heart melts in the embrace. But first, I would like to invoke another legend which is common to several temples in the city, that of the destruction of a world and its new creation.

It is well-known that in Hinduism, creation comes from a preceding destruction. The myths of Kanchi tell us how a demon had managed to contaminate a whole universe. The only way to eliminate him was to burn down this entire world in a huge sacrifice done by Siva himself.

This pyre burnt in a pit which has now been replaced by the pond called "Siva Gangai Tirtta" in the Ekambara Natar. The universe of the Brahma kalpa (kalpa represents the length of time during which a universe lives, 1000 yuga, in other words, ten billion years) was destroyed there. Siva, whose existence is the only one not subjected to cyclic death, was himself the fire, manifested as a linga of flames. What remains of this linga is in a sanctum called Kaccimayanam (the cremation ground of Kanchi) in the Ekambara Natar.

The legend of the Kacchabeshvara tells us how, after having destroyed in one night the whole Brahma kalpa, Siva danced with the Goddess (We may remember that the Sangam kings danced after victory on the battle grounds). He then wanted to proceed to create a new world. He appeared as a linga of light in Kanchi, the only city which had not disappeared since it was protected and made particularly sacred by Siva's presence. From the linga he procreated everything he had previously destroyed: the five elements of nature, the stars, the gods, mankind, animals, plants, and all else. What remains of that linga is in the Kacchabeshvara.

Siva then invited the Secret Teachings to become a mango tree growing near the linga of the Kaccimayanam. He, the God with the color of fire, installed himself as a dazzling linga in the shade of that tree. From the left side of his body he took out the Goddess Lalita, who upon his orders created Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra (the three

gods who create, preserve and destroy the world) from her three eyes (left, right and in her forehead). She went on creating the rest of the universe from her other limbs. What remains of this linga of light is in the main sanctum of the Ekambara Natar.

In those legends, we notice that Siva destroys and creates the worlds, always taking the shape of a dazzling linga of fire. Time and cyclic death do not affect him, since he is truly Time himself.

According to the myths, Kanchi is indeed the oldest city on earth, since it is, like Siva, immortal, keeping within its walls what remains of a bygone destruction and the creation of another long-forgotten universe (the linga of the creation of this universe is in Benares). Between a destruction and a creation, Siva dances in the temple called Kayarohana, in the south of the town, holding on his shoulders the dead bodies of the gods (kaya means body and arohana means being elevated). We will see later that his wild dancing or his carrying of dead bodies, which was by no means unusual for an ancient Dravidian king, probably helped the Aryans to give Siva a bad reputation and to assimilate him with their god of destruction, Rudra.

These important myths, which depict Kanchi as an immortal city going through destructions and creations of universes, are not very well-known. The legend everybody likes is that of the wedding of Siva and Lalita. Kanchi is famous as the city of Siva in love and of the "Goddess with desire in her eyes". They are always united in each linga of the town, and only in Kanchi does the Goddess not stay in a separate sanctum during the day.

At one time, the Goddess playfully put her hands on Siva's eyes, as in a game that lovers frequently play on earth. But Siva's eyes are the sun and the moon, and one second of his time is equal to a very long period in the humans' world. So while she hid his eyes, our universe was deprived of light for many years and suffered greatly. This made the Great God angry at his irresponsible spouse and to punish her he asked her to go to Kanchi, and to worship him in the form of a sand linga under the mango tree.

Lalita went to Kanchi and created a sand linga which she worshipped eagerly. To test her, Siva asked all the waters of the earth to go in the bed of a nearby river, the Kampai, which overflowed. To protect the linga, the Goddess ran to the sanctuary and held the sand linga tightly against herself. Feeling that he was warmly embraced, Siva made the linga very soft so that her breasts and arms imprinted themselves on it forever.



Siva, feeling the love of the Goddess, melted completely and forgave her, later he allowed her to occupy the left half of his body.

The most famous temple in Kanchi, the Kamakkottam, is inhabited by the Goddess alone. In Siva's and Lalita's numerous amorous quarrels (which seem to have been common in Dravidian culture, and are tenderly described in many Sangam poems), the God called her Kali (the black). This remark about her color infuriated her, and she decided to go through many austerities in order to get a fair complexion and become Gauri (the white). She went to Kanchi and stayed in a cave near a lake called Ulakannittirtta (the lake of the lonely maiden). She remains there in her original form, and was visited later by Lakshmi, Vishnu's spouse, after they had a fight as well.

The cave was called Kamakkoti (ten million desires) and is now the Kamakkottam, where Lalita alone can be seen and worshipped. An offering made at this place is equivalent to ten million offerings made anywhere else. In Hindu culture, gifts bring great merit to the giver, and thus in this temple it brings a much greater benefit (it is also why Hindus thank you when they give you something). Here the Goddess gives her devotees anything they want, women, husbands, children, fortune, etc. She grants bliss which follows happiness (this can be taken spiritually or sensually). From her eyes, she also created ten million Cupids.

Thus Kamakshi is a goddess of love, who is in love as her name Lalita suggests, but who is also alone and performing austerities in order to get a fair complexion. But what really draws enormous crowds to the Kamakkottam is that she grants to all who pray to her here anything they desire. People make numerous gifts to her temple, and her statue is covered with gold and jewels. On Fridays, she moves around in a golden chariot; whereas Siva, who mostly grants sainthood to pure and devoted hearts, watches her riches from his almost deserted, crumbling temples.

3. Beliefs



Hinduism is different from other religions because it never had a dominant dogma, nor an absolute truth which stands as a sole explanation of the universe. Indian thought kept and accommodated all and every belief, and rare were the periods of intolerance in India. The early pre-Aryan cults continue to be practiced to this day without being persecuted, and India has welcomed many foreigners, allowing them the freedom of their beliefs.

Hinduism encompasses all the tendencies of human thought, from atheism to planet-worship, through a great many dogmas and beliefs. In this context, God cannot have only one name and one form. The choice of what is the “Truth” is left to the individual, and it is up to him to choose the divine name and form he wants to worship in his heart.

All these beliefs influenced each other from earliest times. Even the Rig Veda contains verses showing a certain knowledge of pre-Aryan myths. The gods were assimilated into each other to such an extent that it is extremely difficult today to retrace India’s history of religions. The only thing we can say with certitude is that from the Indus Valley civilization and throughout history, from the north to the south, from the east to the west, races and ideas mixed with each other, despite the fact that the society was formed of castes, tribes and peoples who managed to keep their own identities.

In this context, it is hard to define beliefs which are typically Dravidian, and most scholars refuse to do so. Nevertheless, some elements, revealed through the light of the Sangam poems, show a specificity which clearly distinguishes Dravidian and Aryan beliefs. The problem with this “light” is that it demonstrates that Hinduism owes much more to the Dravidians than to the Aryans. Objectively, we must acknowledge the existence of Dravidian beliefs which are

widespread throughout India and form the core of today's popular Hinduism.

It is practically impossible to describe Dravidian beliefs, because they are closer to deep feelings than to what we usually call religion. We have to abandon here all our concepts of "God" and approach this subject with a fresh mind and an open heart. Buddha said : "Stop talking! The Ultimate Truth is not even to think". The Dravidians might have said : "Stop talking! Sing! Dance!"

A. Local cults



A great number of beliefs which date back to at least the Sangam period are still perpetuated today. They form the core of the rituals that Tamils diligently practice, whatever their official religion.

We have already spoken about the pongal ritual and the worship of ancestors killed on the battlefield, and of women immolated on their husbands' pyres. We have to add to this list the wives who died before their husbands, "totemic" trees, and all sorts of spirits or concepts which manifest themselves locally and individually as stones, plants, or without form at all.

Every family carries from generation to generation a number of rituals which are peculiar to it, which affirm its identity and its difference, and which assure its protection. We can thus define someone's ethnic background from what and how he worships:

- Pongal = Tamil.
- Ma villakku in the temple of Kacchabeshvara = traditional inhabitant of Kanchi.
- Regular puja to the temple of the snake-goddess of Kanchi and to the buried linga = member of the Mudaliar caste of silk merchants.
- Daily puja to a female ancestor who died before her husband = family.

These rites have a social meaning (through them the social group meets and interacts) and a magical meaning (they are made for the protection of the group). While seemingly these rituals don't have much to do with the notion of a supreme God, for those who practice

them, there is no fundamental difference between all the concepts of divinity. The ancestor who killed herself on her husband's pyre is a manifestation of the great Goddess; in the totemic tree resides the vital energy which is God for most Tamils.

We can see at this very "primitive" level how the fundamental conception of Hinduism emerges: "God" is an energy; he manifests himself everywhere; he has all shapes and forms, and every name. God is an indefinable concept, but each individual defines for himself God's form, limits, and ways of knowing and worshipping in accordance with his own soul. There is a total continuity of the divine in all his manifestations; every being and every thing is potentially this Energy, which can be revealed at any moment according to circumstances.

B. Dravidian gods

Although all the gods of Hinduism may seem common to all India, some of them have aspects which either came from South India or are only found in the Dravidian land. Vishnu and Siva have Tamil names and local forms. The Goddess, expression of the vital energy par excellence, manifests herself all over India, but is the supreme queen in Madurai only. What is even more interesting is that in the South the notion that God is a couple is all-important; balance is necessary and ascetism is suspect, despite the influence of Buddhism and Jainism.

In the South, God is king. The words used to translate "temple", "koil" or "kottam" mean in fact "palace". The deity is always invoked as a king who holds audience during the day and goes to bed at night with his queen. He walks around preceded by his elephant, surrounded by his court and, in older times, by his harem of dancer-courtesans. He wears the most luxurious clothes and numerous jewels, after having had a bath of perfumes, rose water and sandal paste. His kingdom is on earth, where he owns very real fields and lands, as well as in other worlds where he is surrounded by a crowd of spirits and "demons" (pêy).

The description of the life of the Sangam kings corresponds very faithfully to that of the God in the temple. Thus we may wonder where God's battlefield is. He fights, of course, against the demons who disturb the cosmic order, but it is mostly in death that he gains life: If one had a good life, death was the gate to the divine. Coming from a society with rather Spartan ideals, the Dravidian gods have assimilated violence and elevated it to a manifestation of the over-flowing of life's energy. Violence and death are an important part of that energy which

goes far beyond individuals and their eventual passage from one state to another.

Dance played a very special and important role in Dravidian society. It existed in several forms, from the very sophisticated dance of the court dancers to the simple one of the soldiers. It was used to express one's feelings and accompanied every act of a king's life, who was himself an accomplished dancer. All the deities of South India dance, and are surrounded by dancers and musicians.

The married couple is also an essential element of Dravidian Hinduism. Its dynamics are necessary to Creation and the good life of our world. The God's wedding is the most important temple festival, and it is celebrated every year with great pomp and ceremony. Even though they sometimes get a little tense, the gods are a rather stable couple, and are always very much in love. The ideal spouse is a passionate lover, and even the King of kings cannot resist from melting in Devi's embrace.

Love is the preferred theme of Tamil poets and gods. Every night while putting the divine couple in their bedchamber, people sing erotic songs. Although very strong Buddhist and Jain influences tried to make Siva an austere ascetic, he remains full of desire for the Goddess, with whom he sometimes stays for many thousands of years, locked in their bedroom.

B1. Muruga



Since the very first Tamil texts, Muruga has been a favourite god. Son of Siva, he resides in hills and mountains and carries the "vél", the spear. He has a spouse from a good caste and another one from a tribe, thus unifying the whole Tamil population in his worship. He is represented with a peacock as his mount, although it seems that at first

it was an elephant, the kingly animal par excellence. He is a very young king who has in him the benevolent aspects of Siva, but not the wildest traits of his father. Associated with life and with all that is good, he is a protecting god, the spiritual prince of the Tamils.

Some aspects of his worship, such as very impressive ritual mortifications, wild dances and possessions, as well as animal sacrifices, show us clearly that he is, nevertheless, part of the Saiva family. In older times, he joined his parents on the battlefield and had the same Spartan ideals. He was identified as Skanda, a warrior deity of northern India. Although extremely popular in Tamil Nadu, he never developed a strong personality and shares with his parents most of their symbols.

B2. Siva



The name “Siva” appears very infrequently in the most ancient Tamil texts (and not at all in Sanscrit texts) because the Dravidians never liked to give him a precise name, but he is more often referred to as the “King of kings”, the “Supreme Being” and the “Admirable”. He lives under the giant tree, the banyan, carries the trident (a form of vêl) as well as cobras, rides a white bull, has a third eye on his forehead as symbol of his limitless powers and swallows fearlessly the poison that blackened his throat.

With time, the name “Siva” became the most common. It is a Tamil word meaning “He who is red”. When the God appears to humans, he seems to be made of a form filled with red fire, so that finally “red” became his name (on the contrary, other deities seem to be made of flesh just like us). At first supreme and distant, he let other lesser gods be his representatives on earth, taking care of human beings

by whom they could be worshipped. Siva's adoration was mostly meant for the kings. Nevertheless, from the sixth century onwards, devotional movements made his cult more popular and gave him a compassionate aspect, which justified keeping his name in Sanscrit, where "shiva" means "compassion".

We must take note that his association with the Himalayas and the Ganges shows that he knows North India well, where his image is substantially different: there he is an ascetic and is much more static. He spends his time in meditation rather than in dancing. Also, he calms down the wild energy of his spouse, whereas in the South it is clearly the opposite. It is most likely that at a very ancient time the Supreme King of the Dravidians was assimilated into another god, most probably the "master of Yoga", whose origin might have been in the Indus Valley civilization.

In Tamil Nadu, the great God is mostly seen as a king who dances on the battlefield of his victory, as did all the Sangam kings. But for him, the battlefield is the whole universe, which he submits to his rhythm of creation and destruction. He is the light of the sun which brings life and that of the fire which destroys. He has in his hair the Ganges, which is nothing less than the Milky Way - the celestial river-whom he allowed to descend upon earth to help our dessicated world to become green and blue again. He is half male and half female, the source of the divine energy and its expression. He gives powers and takes them back, giving his Grace to those who accompany his dance with their songs.



The Admirable is almost never described as an ascetic, and it seems that he borrowed this side of himself from Buddhism. His form called "Dakshinamurti" (He who is towards the South), which represents him as austere and meditating, is similar in all points to the scene in which Gautama the Buddha taught his dogma for the first time to five disciples in the Deer Park.

On the other hand, Siva's wild dancing on the cremation grounds comes straight from the early military Dravidian customs. It is this

antique vision of him that the Chola preferred. They vowed a steady cult to “Nataraja”, the Lord of Dance, one of the most famous of his forms in today’s world because of its unmistakable beauty. From the ninth century, thanks to the Chola, a whole cosmological dogma was developed and attached to this icon, giving to Saivism a universal appeal, especially to the scientific community which admires this cyclic vision of the universe.

The early Tamil kings had customs which seemed extremely shocking to the Aryans: they went to battle after getting the soldiers and their elephants drunk; they preferred bloody hand-to-hand fighting, which they described in their poems with utmost realism; and they danced with joy amidst the dismembered and crushed bodies of their enemies, before putting them in a pot and boiling them (the pongal...). They might even have started the festivities of war by a human sacrifice. It is most probably why the Supreme King of the Dravidians was associated with Rudra, the Vedic god symbolising destruction.

Despite all this, Siva is shown as a good husband (he NEVER shows himself outside without his wife), a compassionate king who is always ready to give riches and bliss to all those who ask him, a master of the Life Force and of beauty (of which he is the essence), who reveals himself in the outburst of the heart, and in love. He is “Somaskanda”, the divine family, by the side of his spouse and his children, the form of which is found in low-relief at the back of his sanctums. It is this last aspect of himself that he chooses when he goes out of his sanctum, his “utsava murti” (procession form).

Siva carries the moon in his hair, which suggests that perhaps he evolved from a very ancient Mesopotamian god associated with fertility and cattle, which would explain why he is called the Master of the animals. Thus he might be, in this form, the direct descendant of Inanna’s husband. The wedding rituals of these gods, which were celebrated every year with great pomp in Ur, were very similar to those still very much practiced in Tamil Nadu.

In the temples, his main icon, which receives the worship, is not anthropomorphic. It is a “linga”, a complex symbol which doesn’t have the same significance everywhere: in Kashmir, it has the shape of an egg and is the center of the universe; in other places, it is a phallus which comes from very ancient pre-Aryan cults; in Tamil Nadu, it is a pillar, the symbol of infinity (see the legend of Tiruvannamalai, p 97), of the rise of the divine energy and maybe also of the totemic tree (the early Dravidians worshipped wooden pillars).

Sometimes the linga is an old anthill, which was once rendered sacred by the presence of a cobra, which itself is the expression of the earth's power. The cobra is always considered as a manifestation of the Goddess, and those anthills, which are now considered symbols of Siva, must have been at first worshipped as the Goddess. The most impressive of all linga is the one in Chidambaram: it is invisible because it is infinite, elusive, omnipresent space, the perfect symbol of the King of Kings.

B3. Perumal



Perumal is the name of the Dravidian god who was assimilated into Vishnu. He is sometimes described as the brother-in-law of Siva to whom he gives his sister Minakshi, the Goddess of Madurai, or as occupying half the body of the Great God, especially in Tirupati, a temple dedicated to Perumal but whose legend states that it is in fact the two gods combined together in one body. Their exact relationship is hard to ascertain, and depends very much on how we look at it. For the Vaishnavas, he is the Supreme God, and Siva is a rather destructive and inconsiderate demi-god; for the Saiva, he is a lesser God, who receives adoration only because of his great devotion towards the King of kings.

Perumal is represented as a king having a flag with peacock feathers, armed with a mace and a discus, riding an eagle, sitting on a throne with his spouse Lakshmi, and flanked by various saints who make up his court. He often fights against demons, most often by taking "incarnations". In the Veda, he is a solar god who covers the universe in three steps. He is also, for his worshippers, a cosmic king who sleeps a mystic sleep on the Milk Ocean. His most popular incarnation, Krishna, Mayon in Tamil, first appeared in Tamil literature as a shepherd playing a flute and seducing young women. He was later associated with other pre-Aryan heroes and divinities that would much later be described in the Bhagavata-Purana. He is accompanied by his brother Valiyon (Balarama) and his lover Nappinai (Radha). His worship is extremely ancient and very popular in the Deccan, notably in Puri where his legend developed considerably and gave rise to the cult of "the Master of the Universe" (Jaganath).

The legend of Rama was well-known in Tamil Nadu, where are located Rameshvaram and Srirangam, whose temples he is supposed to have founded. (Note that when this aspect of Vishnu wants victory, he prays to Siva...). He is described in the early literature as a simple king, famous for his courage, but certainly not divine. The cult of Rama is a rather late development, even in North India. The fact that his favourite weapon is a bow, which was not considered a weapon of courage by the Dravidians, shows that he probably does not owe much to them.

The incarnations of the boar and the tortoise, very frequently shown in Saiva iconography, most probably have a tribal origin. They could be the result of Hinduism having incorporated different totemic tribal cults. It was also to assimilate other religions that Buddha, Vamana (a dwarf) and Simha-Narayana (a creature half-lion, half-man) became Vishnu's incarnations.

B4. Vinayakar



Vinayakar is the name given to Siva's other (adoptive) son, better known in the West as Ganesha. Although elephants were regal animals par excellence, Vinayakar was unknown to the early Dravidians. Most likely, he arrived in South India in the seventh century with the "sapta matrika" (the seven mothers), brought by the Chalukyas. His origins are, nevertheless, from the Deccan, and he is not an Aryan deity.

It is possible that he was immediately assimilated since he resembles an elephant, which is a symbol of power, but at any rate, he quickly became a favourite god of the Dravidians. He seems to have an irresistible charm which helped him spread his cult not only all over India, but also all over the world (he was incorporated into Buddhism even in Japan and is celebrated on a pillar in New York's Bronx Zoo).

Symbol of wisdom, he has a great respect for women who are all emanations of his mother who created him alone. He helps and protects,

and that is why he is always worshipped first in the temples. No one starts writing anything before drawing his symbol on top of the page, and in some castes his effigy is given to a newlywed couple as their “first child”, which explains his most common Tamil name: Pillaiyar (a polite term for “child”).

B5. The Goddess



The Goddess, who has numerous forms and personalities, is first of all a concept. In her are melted all the female deities, all the women who for some reason (often simply because they died before their husband) became divine. More than all the male gods, she is unique and manifold at the same time, the vibrant energy which moves the world. She is truly universal.

In Tamil Nadu, she is mostly the fitting wife of Siva, the Goddess Korravai who accompanied the Sangam kings to victory and feasted on the bodies of the dead soldiers (who thus very directly entered the divine). She shares most of her symbols with her husband: the trident, the cobras, the dance, the kingship, the third eye, the bull, and even sometimes the ability to swallow poison.

In the beginning of time she emerges from God in his reabsorbed state, which holds the potential (Siva) and the energy (Shakti) at the same time. The couple then creates the world in the most natural way, by mating. It is through her sexual fulfillment that she cools down and gives to human beings all they desire, regulating her creative energy. When she is frustrated, the strength which accumulates in her becomes threatening, and her wrath even shakes the gods.

Her energy is so powerful that it is always ready to overflow, bringing sickness (she incarnates herself in smallpox) and destruction. The Goddess is often described as bloodthirsty, the tongue hanging

between her fangs, surrounded by flames, riding a lion and well-armed, dancing on cremation grounds where her temples were often situated. She is a fierce warrior who killed without hesitation the demon Mahisha, who had the shape of a buffalo: you will often see the representation of this scene, in which her violence unleashes to preserve cosmic order.

Even though she is often shown as frightening, she is, happily, first of all a queen, albeit a fierce one, protecting each kingdom and village, knowing how to scare demons, and always ready to grant to her devotees what they pray for. It is she who comes in the shape of a cobra, living near the houses, drinking the milk women bring her, killing rats and mice, and helping girls to find husbands and to have beautiful children.

When an evil spirit takes possession of some woman, she exorcises her through lengthy rituals and with the help of a priest or a sorceress. Finally she occupies the empty space left by the spirit, this time possessing benevolently (see the paragraph on Kalavai, p 91). It is mostly during the month of July-August that you will see the Goddess in this way, manifesting herself through numerous “cured” women.

The Goddess is, therefore, potentially in every woman, manifesting her divinity through them, usually without the intervention of a male priest. Women worship her directly, using rituals that they transmit from generation to generation. The well-being of the whole household depends on the good relationship between the spouse and the Goddess. Thus, in a certain way, the woman is spiritually superior to the man (it is the opposite in Aryan culture). In ancient times, this was compensated by a relative social inferiority.

The Goddess is manifested Energy, receiving from her husband the power to create, preserve and destroy the universe; she gives life as well as death, good fortune as well as bad fortune. She is the queen of the world and its very substance, manifested at all levels, from the ancestor who died “well” to the great Goddess Parvati, through all the “Amman”, the protecting deities of all Tamil villages. Very present in the physical world, it is not really a good thing to attract her wrath since, unlike the male gods, she will hit back quickly and strongly.

To explain all of her characteristics, I could have quoted texts which are 5000 years old and were written in Mesopotamia. Inanna, the goddess-queen of Ur, corresponds totally to the spouse of the King of kings. My goal here is not to describe in detail their resemblance, but it could not have come from a mere coincidence. The Hindu Goddess is thus, as well as Toda tribe, a proof of the very direct

influence of ancient Mesopotamian culture (pre-Semitic) on that of South India.

B6. Planets and other minor deities



Planets are not considered major deities, but they look after the well-being of people who include them in their rituals. Most probably their veneration remains from ancient cults, and it is mostly the Sun and Saturn who are worshipped. Apart from very rare examples (Suryanarkoil for instance), they do not have temples of their own but are included in those of more important gods. The Sun is thanked in the yearly festival of pongal and in the beginning of many rituals. Saturn is feared and subsequently people do not forget to address him with a preventive prayer.

Astronomy also plays a great role in the life of the Tamils, defining good and bad moments. Since Dravidian astrology has assimilated several systems which do not always agree, it is characterised by its extreme complexity.

The Sangam kings brought in fashionable new gods and philosophies, mostly from North India, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. As I wrote earlier, all of these had a great influence on the development of Tamil thought, although they never succeeded in completely erasing its specific character.

The last form that God chose to appear in, and which is becoming increasingly fashionable, is called Ayappa, a Kerala king who had a Christian friend and a Muslim friend he incorporated into his cult. We clearly see here how the usual Hindu dynamic unfolds: it incorporates foreign religions. Strangely, Ayappa is a 100%-male god, and might represent a negative reaction to Goddess worship. He is the child of Siva and Vishnu (thus he doesn't have a mother and unites the two main tendencies of theist Hinduism); he doesn't get married (through his guru, he assimilates Indian monism and Brahmanism, which preach celibacy); and he came to earth not only to absorb aggressive foreign beliefs and the various Hindu schools, but also -and mostly- to kill the demoness Mahishi...

Only men, young girls and menopausal women can visit his sanctuary of Sabarimalai, in the mountains of Kerala. Every year, millions of his devotees gather there in December-January for his great festival. Wearing dark blue or black clothes, those who worship him must follow a long cycle of rituals. We may wonder if men, tired of watching the unique and intense relationship that unites the Goddess to women, and jealous of the innate divinity expressed by their power to create, didn't invoke this 100%-male God so that he would give them a share of the divine.

C. The development of *bhakti*



The real origin of “bhakti”, a sanscrit term which designates devotional fervour towards a unique God, is uncertain. Very early in Indian history numerous systems were developed to reach a supreme God, but the overflowing of love which characterises bhakti appeared relatively late and ... in Tamil Nadu.

Already before the beginning of the Christian era, we find traces all over India of cults worshipping a supreme God (monotheism, in a way), and which were always centered around pre-Aryan deities. In northern India, Pasupata, one of Siva's forms, was associated with the development of very specific techniques to reach the divine: yoga, meditation, and the control of the breath. Vasudeva, assimilated with the Tamil Mayon and Krishna, gave the very famous “Bhagavad gita”. But those cults which recognized a supreme God asked of the devotee all sorts of special efforts to reach divinity. Meditation, unselfish service, self-control, etc. were necessary. Sheer love of God was not that important.

It was a woman born in Karikal, a Tamil port city, who would have expressed “bhakti” for the first time, in the sixth century. However, she did not consider herself a religious reformer. From her time until the Medieval period, many other Tamil saints, both Saiva and Vaishnava, were the first devotees to be “mad with love”: they were men, women, kings, queens, hunters, “untouchables”, Brahmins, ascetics, playboys, 63 who adored Siva (the Nayanar) and 12 who venerated Vishnu (the Alvar).

Their songs, always in Tamil, were known as far as Kashmir, showing their great influence. Later many religious reformers, mostly under the sponsorship of the Cholas, codified these worships, making them fit into dogmas and creating organised schools of thought. Ramanuja (11th century) and Madhava (13th) originated the Vaishnava schools. Siva’s dance was stiffened into the posture he is usually known for today and received an official dogma thanks to Tirumular (8th), Sekkilar (12th), Meykandar (13th) and Manavasagangadandar (13th). Along side this Tamil tradition grew another, inspired from it, but more ritualistic and written in Sanscrit. It is at that time that Shankara (8th) created the “advaita vedanta” (the end of the Veda) which is supposed to be the ultimate development of Brahmanism, although this Brahmin, who came from Travancore, had been very influenced by Dravidian beliefs, and his spiritual successors still worship the Goddess Kamakshi in Kanchi.

All these schools and cults, which are still very much practiced today, constitute what is now called “Hinduism” in Tamil Nadu, and even all over India when it comes to advaita vedanta.

From the ninth century onwards, numerous schools of Saivism or Vaishnavism developed all over India, even as far as Kashmir where the most mystic Siva cult grew. In the twelfth century, other worshippers of the King of kings, the Lingayat of Karnataka, founded a school which did not recognize the caste system and claimed complete equality between all of God’s devotees. They came from the tradition which, from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, states that the devotee is necessarily divine, and thus equal to any other whatever his origin or his customs (see the paragraph on Kalahasti, p 99). They asserted themselves as social reformers, which eventually led to a civil war. They are still today the only ones who do not really belong to a caste (we become Lingayat through an initiation and not through birth, and anyone can be initiated, whatever his origin, sex and background. Thus YOU can become a Lingayat but not a Brahmin).

Bhakti opposes Brahmanism on this very essential point: it gives God's grace to the devotee whoever he is (even Shankara, who is the most famous of India's philosophers in the West, claims that only male Brahmins can have access to the supreme knowledge). Sometimes bhakti establishes its own hierarchy, with the priest or the spiritual master just under God and before the mere devotee, but at least implicitly, it always contains a certain negation of the caste system, especially in Sivaism.

You will notice that I didn't describe the dogma of bhakti. There are in fact several dogmas, as I indicated earlier. But how can we explain love ? To express it, men from all over the world chose songs and poetry, so I will let my favourite saints tell you here what they felt (do not expect objectivity on my part):

C1. *Karaikkalammai*

The legend says that Punidavadi was a mere housewife, pious but not really remarkable, until the day her husband brought her two mangoes that he expected her to serve him for lunch. While he was taking care of his business (he was a merchant), a sanyasin came and asked for food from the young woman. She had nothing else but the two mangoes and, expecting that her husband would let her have one, she gave it to the begging monk. Alas, at lunch her husband ate his mango and asked for the second one for himself. Not knowing what to do, Punidavadi ran to her kitchen and prayed to Siva who made a mango appear in her hands.

Her husband noticed at once that Siva's mango was different and asked where it came from. Of course, he found his wife's answer unbelievable, and required that she again accomplish the miracle. Siva made another mango appear in Punidavadi's hands under the stupefied eyes of her husband who, understanding that his wife was a saint, ran away.

Punidavadi waited for years for her husband to come back, and finally learned that he had moved to Madurai, married again and had a girl child to whom he had given her name. She went to see him, and he prostrated in front of her. Seeing this, she said : "It is only for him that I kept my body and my beauty, O Lord, take away my flesh and give me the body of the devils (pêy) who worship your feet".

She then went to the Himalayas to see Siva who resides on Mount Kailasa. She climbed the mountain standing on her hands so that she would not tread on this holy earth. Upon seeing her, the God called her

“Ammai !” (mother, Goddess, a word of respect for a woman) and she answered “Appa !” (father, a word of respect for a man). From that time, she was called the Goddess of Karaikkal (Karikal), Karaikkalammaiyaar.

Siva asked her to go to Tiru Alangadu, a cremation ground where he dances through eternity. She went there still walking on her hands, and stayed forever, singing the praises of the Lord, and accompanying his dancing with her cymbals.

The Lord she described totally conforms to the terrifying vision of the Dravidian gods:

“How can I reach him through love ?
On him, a snake is dancing
Preventing anyone to approach him.
Moreover, he himself
puts on necklaces of old skulls
and whitened bones,
and, rejoicing, rides
a bull.”

(From: Kârâvêlane, 1956, p 33)

Yet, he is really a supreme King, who lives in everyone’s heart, who is known through devotion, and whose grace is easily won:

“Practicing the great way of the vision of the King,
soliciting the great grace of the King, you
wonder where the King resides. He resides here, in the thought
of people like myself. He is easy to behold.” (ibid. p 21)

He lives in the devotee’s thoughts and must reside in the heart, such is the Admirable, the Lord of Karaikkalammaiyaar.

“Who is able to behold Hara (Siva)? Covering him with the cover
of love and, through a glorious privilege, enclosing him
in our single heart, we keep him
mysteriously concealed.” (ibid.p 28)

C2. Mahadevi

This saint, who sang the Lord’s glories in Kannada, lived in the twelfth century, while the Lingayat were expanding their movement in

Karnataka. She was married at a very young age against her will, since she only had love for Siva. She left her home and wandered, clothed only in her hair, until she was admitted to the assembly of the Lingayat, the Anubhavamantapa. She died in her early twenties, leaving to posterity songs full of love, and of the martial lyricism that characterises the Dravidians:

“Look at
Love’s marvellous ways:

if you shoot an arrow
plant it
till no feather shows;

if you hug
a body, bones
must crunch and crumble;

weld,
the welding must vanish.

Love is then
our lord’s love.”
(Ramanujan, 1973, p 142)

Her vision is very special. She sees Siva as a most handsome king, a lover beyond all that can be imagined:

“Locks of shining red hair
a crown of diamonds
small beautiful teeth
and eyes in a laughing face
that light up fourteen worlds-
I saw His glory
and seeing, I quell today
the famine in my eyes.

I saw the haughty Master
for whom men, all men
are but women, wives.

I saw the Great One
who plays at love
with Shakti,
original to the world,

I saw His stance
and began to live.” (ibid.p 120)

C3. The *Nayanar*

Although all of the Tamil saints were not singers, the most famous left us marvellous songs:

Appar, who was the head of a Jain monastery before he was reconverted to Saivism, at the beginning of the seventh century in Kanchi, was one of those who made bhakti triumph.

“ ‘O most desired, O king, O lord, eternal form,
my fortune, supreme mystic!' Thus I sang each day.
My gold! My hill of coral! in love of you...
I have journeyed far to see the bright flower of your feet”.

(Basham, 1981, p 333)

A century later, Sundarar was not really what we usually call a saint. Although he was a Brahmin, he was in love with two low-caste women (and a Chera king...), and asked Siva to help him quell their jealousies. We must mention that the King of kings had interrupted and prevented his first wedding to a Brahmin woman, claiming that Sundarar was his slave. He lived in Tiruvarur.

“A sinner, I have left the way of love and service.
Too well I have known the meaning of sickness and pain.
I will go now and worship.
How foolish I have been! How long can I be parted
From my pearl, my mighty jewel, my diamond,
Lord of the shrine of Arur?”

(Basham, 1981, p 334)

Manikkavasagar lived in the ninth century and was a Pandya king who obviously preferred the Chola country to Madurai. He wrote numerous poems on the Dancer of Chidambaram (whose name at that time was Tillai). He was an insatiable pilgrim and left an impressive collection of poems. He saw Siva's dance in Tirupperundurair:

"It was a motionless dance - indeed it was so:
My words faltering, my mind quivering,
My tears trembling at the brink of my eyes,
I beheld Him and His Grace came to me
On earth - Oh Thou snake charmer!"

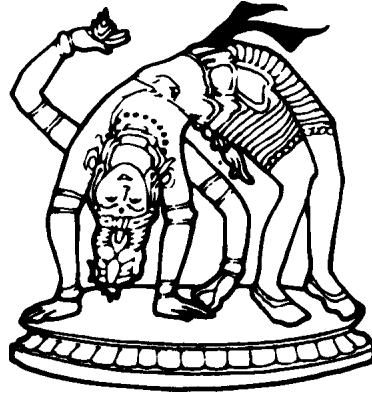
(Ratna Navaratnam, 1963, p 145)

He is possessed with love, shining God's Grace. He lives in beatitude:

"Oh, to sink in Bliss,
Mingling, for ever mingling with Thy grace,
Melting and with soul pulsating in rhythmic dance!
In grace, grant the Bliss of sweet union."

(Ratna Navaratnam, 1963, p 172)

4. The temples



A. The structure of temples

The temples of Tamil Nadu, which are often of huge proportions, are much more than a place to pray and meditate. They have served to preserve the art, culture and history of the people.

Temples are abundantly mentioned in the Sangam literature, but there are no material traces left of these early temples. We must assume that they were made of perishable materials since nothing remains of them or of the beautiful townhouses and monasteries of that time. Most probably they were built of wood or bricks, and decorated with stucco sculptures. Many temples were simple platforms around a sacred tree. The priest of the Ekambara Natar have a tradition according to which the linga which is in the temple was originally situated under the mango tree.

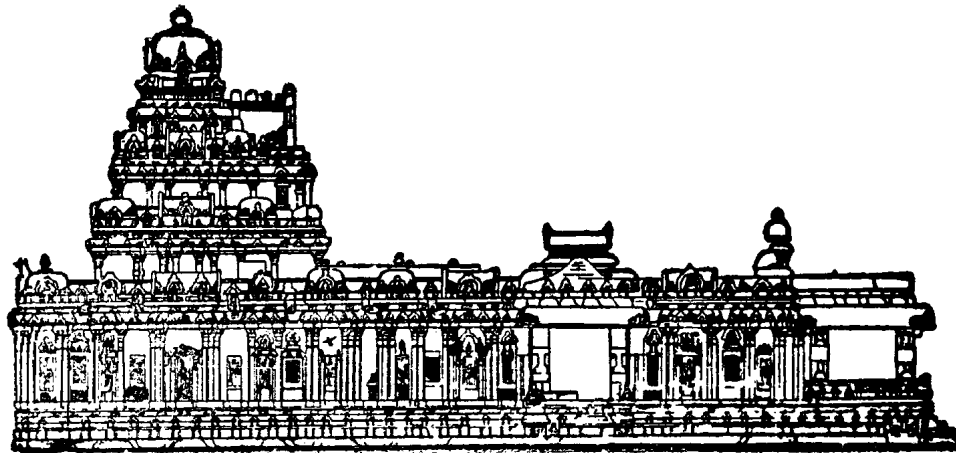
The first stone temples were built by the Pallavas in the sixth century. Many of them were carved out of and sculptured directly from rocky hills, such as those of Ajanta and Ellora. They were also built in compounds, with many shrines to various gods on the same site, like in Mahabalipuram. These early temples were very small, with a simple layout composed of a sanctum and a porch. The Kailasa Natar of Kanchi, built in the seventh century, already had a more complex structure with three concentric enclosures (prakara) and smaller sanctuaries subordinated to the main sanctum.

During the following centuries, the temples were enlarged and more and more rigorously structured. At first, the roof of the sanctum

(vimana) became higher and bigger, reaching its apex in the temple of Tanjore, at the beginning of the eleventh century, where the vimana reaches 58 metres (190 feet).

“Repetition is inevitably one of the factors that explain the stylistic evolution of Hindu temples. The rhythmic projections of the temple plan carried into the vertical elevation were created by multiplications of the original central wall projection with which early temples were provided. ... In the southern style, temple superstructures repeated the architectonic elements of the main wall beneath, the temple masses rising upwards in a number of storeys.”

(Michell, 1977, p 92)



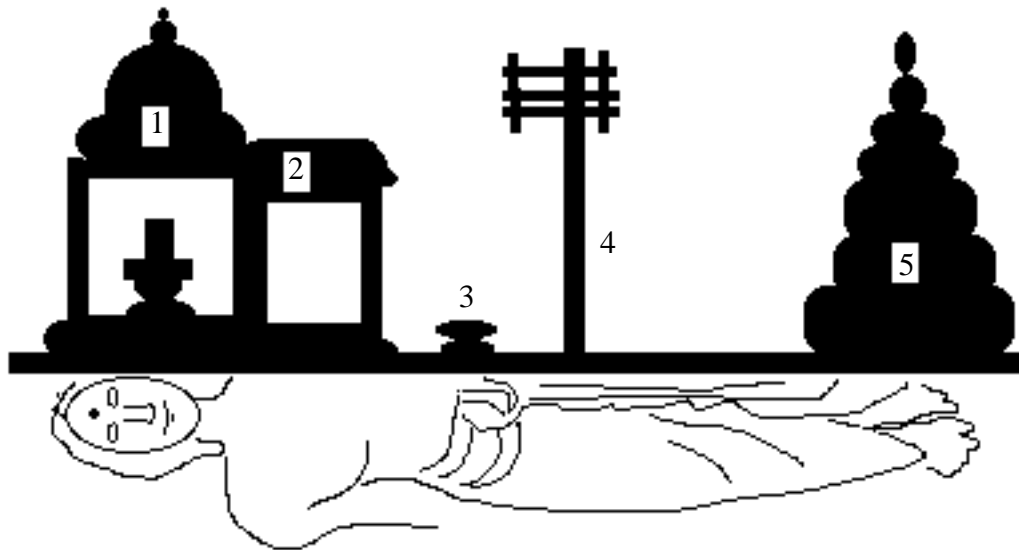
The temple sites are surrounded by a wall, and sometimes, as in the case of larger temples, by several concentric walls enclosing many smaller sanctuaries, one or several man-made ponds (tirtha), open halls (mandapa), temple offices, the kitchen, stables, warehouses, etc. The vimana lost its size and importance, while a pyramidal structure (gopura) grew on the entrance gate.

In the sixteenth century, the great Tamil temple reached its most complex form, which is today's standard. The structure of this type of temple is a symbolic representation of the universe, a “mandala”.

“Great importance is attached to the establishment of the temple's ground plan because it functions as a sacred geometric diagram (mandala) of the essential structure of the universe.... By constructing this diagram to regulate the form of the temple, a symbolic connection is created, binding together the world of the gods - the universe, and its miniature reconstruction through the work of man - the temple.” (Michell, 1977, p 71)

The Hindus can use the temple with great freedom. There is a “way” to go through which is by itself a form of worship. We start by following the axis leading from the gate to the sanctum, have the vision

of the God, and then go out, encircling the sanctum by walking through the various prakara, and worshipping at all the minor sanctuaries whose order is carefully laid out (see the detailed description of the visit of the Ekamabara Natar p 62). In the axis from the gate to the sanctum, we find important elements corresponding to the “form” of the God himself:



(from S.K. Ramachandra Rao 1979, p 97)

1= “garbhagriha” (sanctum), 2= “antarala” (antechamber), 3= “bali pitha” (seat of the sacrifice), 4= “dvaja stambha” (flag post), 5= “gopura” (monumental entrance gate).

When we enter a temple, we usually pass through a “tower” of pyramidal shape which is often gigantic (up to 50 metres -165 feet), which is called in Tamil gopura. It is then customary to start by worshipping a Vinayakar, usually situated just under or by the side of this great gate. We then reach the flag post, which symbolises the God’s spinal column. The sight of this dvaja stambha should help the devotee’s divine energy rise, and he should enter a state of semi-trance.

“As soon as the devotee sights the threshold of the gateway, he bends down and touches a mandala on it before crossing it: this marks for him the transition from the ‘way of the world’ (loka dharma) to the ‘way of God’ (Siva dharma). But he continues to be in the common state of ‘wakefulness’ until he reaches the flag-post or the ‘dispensation seat’. He then has the first vision of the sanctum, and gets into the state of ‘dream’.”

(Ramachandra Rao, 1979, p 139)

We then reach the bali pitha, which corresponds to the navel of the God. It is a black stone representing an over-bloomed lotus on which offerings are made, especially the offering of our soul, when prostrating in front of it. From there we have a first sight of the icon in the sanctum.

Next, we go through the “maha mandapa” (not represented on the drawing) to the “intermediary space”, the chest of the God, the antarala. In those halls we find representations of Nandi, the white bull, the God’s mount and the symbol of the devotee’s soul. We have to stop in the “ardha mandapa” to look at the God in his sanctum, the garbhagriha, which corresponds to his head. The devotee looks directly at the icon, which shines in the darkness (it is forbidden to go inside the sanctum, except for priests). He receives the “darshana”, the vision of the God and his blessings. At this point, he should feel peace invade him (shanti), something similar to a deep sleep. In this state he can now worship, giving the priest incense, flowers, fruits, and camphor which will be offered while the devotee prays in his heart.

“As (the devotee) proceeds towards the sanctum and stands in front of the sanctum (in the vestibule), he sinks into the state of ‘deep sleep’. When he looks at the icon, the higher state of ‘semi-tranquillity’ (santodita) descends upon him. And when he has suffused himself with the vision of the icon, he gets into the state of ‘tranquillity’ (santa).” (Ramachandra Rao, 1979, p 141)

Afterwards, the devotee walks out circumambulating the God clockwise, following the first prakara (enclosure). These successive encirclings of the God (pradashina) are the last phase of the worship. The devotee follows each prakara from the innermost to the outermost and walks keeping his right side towards the sanctum. On his way, he comes across many smaller shrines whose gods must be revered in the order he meets them (see the detailed description of the Ekamabara Natar). During this circumambulation, the devotee must be concentrating and worshipping. It is said that “he must walk slowly, without moving his arms, praying with his tongue, and meditating in his heart. He must walk as slowly as a woman on the verge of giving birth and who is carrying on her head a jar of oil”.

Siva, surrounded by his court, has been properly worshipped; he is happy.

Finally, before leaving the temple and after a (short) meditation, the devotee prostrates himself in front of the bali pitha, his head turned towards the north. It has to be done in such a way that eight parts of the body touch the ground; men lie face down and women

kneel and then touch the ground with their forehead. In this manner, the devotee takes leave of the God.

Temples go far beyond their religious function. The ponds they contain are water reservoirs that are very useful during the dry season; poor people and pilgrims wash their clothes in them and even drink their water. The mandapa, open halls sometimes of gigantic proportions, are havens of coolness and tranquility where pilgrims, sanyasin (wandering monks), or anyone can rest or sleep away from the crowd and be refreshed by the breeze (eventually, they can also be used for meditating...). The temples are still used today for cultural activities, especially during festivals, such as dancing, singing, storytelling, etc. Musicians and singers play a part in the daily rituals, and before Independence women danced during the puja. Architecture of past times remained intact only when it was religious. In other words, the temple has always been the important place in which Tamil culture unfolds and is preserved.

By the side of the temple, there were often -and sometimes still are- schools, dispensaries and lodging houses for pilgrims. Food is distributed daily to poor people and sanyasin who use the temple as a refuge. (See P.G. Sreenevasa Rao 1980.) In medieval times, the kings who conquered a town immediately destroyed the palace of the vanquished, but on the other hand, they protected and even embellished the temples on whose walls they usually engraved an inscription praising themselves and their victory. Thus the temples also served as a way to make known to everyone, present and future, their power, their greatness and their victories, sometimes even their genealogy.

The great Hindu temple is a very important institution in Tamil society. In most cases, it is the focus of community life through its festivals which attract numerous pilgrims and through its social impact. In the rituals, the “king” and the dominant castes are given “honours”, displaying the hierarchy of people who have rights over the land.

The temple is still the preferred stage for demonstrations of prestige and domination. “Thanking God” by giving important donations to temples or organizing ostentatious rituals are the best ways to show the community that one is rich and powerful. Even better, the subtle privilege of being permanently allowed a good spot close to the sanctum during the rituals, and especially during the festivals when such spots are very highly valued and fought for, is a clear display of one’s prominence.

The best proof that the temple is the stage for displays of power and prestige is the incredible number of lawsuits which are fought over

small details involving the temple and someone's prestige.

A large temple is also a real industry, often employing a considerable number of people. Hundreds are on its payroll, from superintendants and administrators to goldsmiths, carpenters, musicians, gardeners, cooks, sweepers, astrologers, and, of course, priests. Needless to say, the temple needs large amounts of money. Usually, it gets it from donations by the devotees and income from its lands. All this has led to the temple having a more definite and complex legal structure, which will be analyzed in further detail, in the case study of the Ekambara Natar of Kanchi.

B. Rituals

B1. The "kumbhabhisheka", or consecration of the temple

The first ritual of a temple and its icons is its consecration, the "mahakumbhabhisheka". This ritual is repeated after each renovation.

The ceremony lasts three days. The first day, the priests prepare a "sacrificial ground" outside the temple and all the elements of the ritual which will begin late at night. They lay out pots (kalasha) of brass, copper, or clay for the least important; they wrap multicolored silk threads around them, fill them with water and special ingredients, and place mango leaves and a coconut on top. These pots represent all the deities of the temple, the visible ones (the icons) and the invisible ones, about one hundred of them in all for a medium temple. Sacrificial fires are arranged in the eight cardinal points and in front of the pots. The two kalasha representing Siva and the Goddess are clothed and covered with jewels, just as if they were statues.

The second day, after various purifications, the priests light the fires. Meanwhile, those who financed the ceremony and the construction or the repairs verify that all is ready. Women in procession bring the offerings carried on large trays, as well as the necessary elements of the ritual. Everything is carefully laid out on the sacrificial ground. The offerings to the fires, mostly ghee (clarified butter) and "medicinal" plants, last from dawn until late at night, with a break during the hottest hours of the day. Priests make sure that they keep the fires burning permanently.

In the temple, the devotees work in shifts to mix the ingredients of a paste that will be used to glue the icons to the temple, the "ashta bandha". The priests link the pots to the statues they represent by wires

of “dharba” grass (which is to divine energy what copper is to electricity...). They recite mantra (sacred formulas) to the pots while touching them with bunches of dharba grass. Through these rituals, they concentrate the divine energy in the water of the kalasha, which become the outward shapes of the gods. Through the darbha grass, the energy is transmitted from the priest (divine energy always originates in the human) to the pot and then to the icon.

The third day, the priests finish morning rituals which are similar to those of the previous day, and they glue the statues to their base with the ashta bandha. Before noon, they bring the kalasha in procession into the temple and finally pour the water contained in them on the corresponding statues and on the top of the vimana and gopura. Pilgrims, who come in large crowds to see this, rush to try to get a small drop of this very sacred water. In the evening, the first puja is performed, followed by a procession of the utsava murti (brass statues of the gods specially made for processions) through the streets of the city.

I have briefly described these rituals to show how they establish a link between a sacrifice made on an external ground, with non-anthropomorphic temporary representations of the gods, offerings to fires and darbha grass (the indispensable grass of vedic rituals), and the temple, a closed and fixed space with permanent and mostly anthropomorphic icons, where darbha grass will be replaced by plants more specific to the main God of the temple (a bilva leaf for Siva).

This ceremony is re-enacted briefly every year during the pavitra utsava and, to a lesser extent, in the brahmotsava (these festivals will be examined further down). That is why the largest temples, such as the Ekambara Natar, have a special room which is a dedicated sacrificial ground, the yajna shala.

These rituals also demonstrate the Indian notion that God is an energy, which the rituals direct and control. They are a manipulation of the divine, which always originates in the priest since it is within himself, because of his deep identity with God, that is found this “divine energy”, which will be transmitted through plants and liquids. This is a constant feature of all Hindu rituals.

B2. Daily rituals

There are two types of daily rituals: the puja which are performed at regular times, whether or not any devotees are in the temple, and whose goal is to renew the divine energy and to adore the icon, and the

arcana, which is done by priests only at the order and on the behalf of the devotee, and at any time.

In principle, a linga in a temple needs at least two puja a day in order to remain divine. Without it, it is just a mere black piece of stone. In the larger temples, there are usually six puja every day. In the kumbhabhisheka I just described, the goal of the ceremony was to have the divine energy penetrate the icon. The puja only “re-activates” the linga, but once it has been brought to its full divinity, it is mostly an adoration, a ritual similar to what would be done to honour a most important guest or a king.

At first, the priest purifies himself and identifies with God. Then he goes to the linga and transfers his divinity to it. Afterwards, he worships it by bathing it (abhisheka) with all sorts of liquids or pleasing substances: water, rose water, santal water, milk, yogurt, fruit juices, honey, etc. He offers it food (naivedya), which is a very secret act that the public is never allowed to see. Finally, he presents it with various objects (a mirror, fans, weapons, scepters) and finishes by waiving various flames in front of it, especially complex oil lamps with many wicks and, most importantly, a camphor flame (diparadhana). These puja are similar to those every Saiva devotee must make at home, except that they are more elaborate in temples.



Thus, the puja is the intermediary between the big consecrations and the “small” worships that are the arcana. Through this ritual, the linga or the icon has become completely sacred and radiant; it can now receive the veneration of the devotees and give back to them a little of its divine effulgence through the vision they experience (darshana).

The arcana is a simple offering of some fruits, flowers, a coconut which will be broken at the God’s feet, a little incense, and camphor whose flame causes the shiny surface of the icon to sparkle. It can be done at any moment and for any reason by the priest, according to the wishes of the worshipper.

B3. The festivals

Besides their obvious religious purpose, festivals have a great social importance: there we can receive “honours” (reserved places close to the sanctum, participatory rights to the ritual, etc.) which are very much sought after to increase one’s social prestige. The main festivals enrich the lives of all those who live close to the temple, and if it’s the festival of a major temple or a rare ritual such as a kumbhabhisheka, they attract numerous pilgrims.

There are a number of important festivals in temples year-round. The “Siva ratri” (the night of Siva) is the most important in Saiva temples. These festivals are often accompanied by artistic events, especially “navaratri” (the nine nights dedicated to the Goddess), but they do not attract great crowds of devotees and practically no pilgrims, except when they combine themselves with the yearly festival of the temple (brahmotsava). Here is a list of the most important Saiva festivals. I will not go into details because it would be too long, and there have been individual studies made for some of them (see the bibliography).

“Tai pusam” is a festival that comes in the month of February. It is an occasion to make a pilgrimage to the temples of Muruga, the “younger” son of Siva. During this festival, devotees make impressive mortifications. The sanctuaries of Muruga in the temples of Siva are especially honoured on that day.

“Siva ratri” is a night which is consecrated to Siva and comes every month, one or two days before the new moon. The night of February-March is the most important, the “maha Siva ratri”. That night, all the linga are worshipped with an abhisheka, a bath. In the great temples, there are often over a hundred linga in the second and third prakara. During the day, the devotee must fast, and from the evening until the following morning, six puja are done to the main linga of the temple. Very often singers, storytellers or musicians are invited to perform in the temple for the benefit of the God (and the devotees who have to fight sleep).

It is mostly in the month of adi (July-August) that temples will become very busy. This month is dedicated to the Goddess, and thus it is in Goddess temples that most events happen, but since Siva temples always contain a sanctum to the Devi (except in Kanchi), many rituals and processions go on there too. It is also the time when “cured” women become possessed by the Goddess (see p 50).

During the next month (August-September), we find the “pavitra

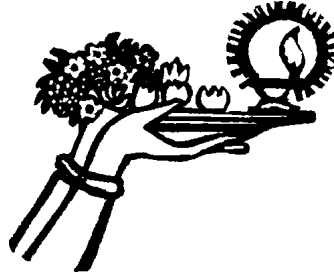
utsava”, a purification ceremony which is a sort of smaller consecration of the temple. The priests change the holy thread of the linga, one day before all Brahmins change theirs, which must be done ritually at least once a year and always on this occasion. They make a “sacrifice” in the yajna shala during which they consecrate the threads which are nothing close to what Brahmins actually wear: they are thick and made with multicolored silk threads. The goal of these rituals is to wipe out the mistakes that might have been committed in the worships during the year.

At the end of August or early in September, Vinayakar chaturthi is a festival dedicated to this god and hence his sanctuaries are especially worshipped on that day, and sometimes during the following ten days. Vinayakar has many shrines throughout Indian towns and villages, and there is at least one of them in every Siva temple.

During the month which corresponds to September-October, we find the “nava ratri” (nine nights) festival which lasts ten days. Elaborate worships are made in the Devi temples, and in all temples, the Goddess comes out of her sanctum and sits in her utsava murti form, during the whole festival, under a canopy which is set in a mandapa in front of the sanctuaries. Throughout these days, every utsava murti in every temple is specially decorated with the most beautiful clothes and jewelery. Each night, musical or dance performances are organized in the temples.

“Skanda shasti” is a festival dedicated to Muruga towards the end of October or at the beginning of November. On that day, the sanctuaries of Muruga are very busy and special rituals are made.

At the end of November or in the beginning of December, “Karttikai dipa” is a light festival which echoes that done at home, dipavali, but a month later. It is mostly celebrated in Tiruvannamalai where it corresponds to that temple’s yearly festival (brahmotsava), since the linga represents the “fire” element. All the temples of Muruga and Siva are illuminated with thousands of small oil lamps, and the priests make a big fire on the axis leading to the santum, whose ashes and remains are much sought after by the devotees. It commemorates the time when Siva appeared as an infinite pillar of fire (see p 97).



“Arudra” is part of a cycle of six festivals which divide the year into “Nataraja’s hours”: a ceremony in June-July represents noon, and this “Arudra”, the festival in December-January (it’s usually close to the first of January) celebrates the God’s midnight. Every two months, a ritual marks the passing of four hours. This cycle is related only to Nataraja, and thus is especially important in Chidambaram, although every Siva temple has a shrine dedicated to Nataraja.

Throughout the year, less important festivals are regularly celebrated. For instance, every thirteenth day after the new or full moon the “pradosha” (trouble, confusion) commemorates the time when Siva prevented the destruction of the world by swallowing the menacing poison, during the well-known episode of the “churning of the Milk Ocean”. On that occasion, the utsava murti of Somaskanda is taken in procession around the prakara, mounted on a silver Nandi (when the temple can afford it).

Every Monday is dedicated to Siva, every Friday to the Goddess and Vinayakar, every Tuesday to Muruga, etc... Regularly, there are festivals for the minor deities (Indra, Hanumant). Thus, even if we only consider temple festivals and exclude those made at home which are also important, it is impossible to account for all the celebrations.

Once a year, every temple has a specific festival which lasts ten days and is called its “brahmotsava”. As usual, it consists mostly of elaborate processions and special puja related to them. Although the brahmotsava is always different for each temple (it usually re-enacts the foundation legend of that temple), it follows a similar pattern which I will briefly describe:

We start with the preliminary purifications and protection of all the implements that will be used. Early morning the first day, a long thin flag is attached to the flag post and the yajna shala is opened (when there is one, otherwise a special area is enclosed by a temporary fence), and the priests make an abhisheka to the main icon. In the morning and in the evening, there are special puja and abhisheka followed by processions of the gods in the prakara and in the streets surrounding the temple, during which the representations of the deities are always

different (different utsava murti on different mounts). The details of all this evoke the legend peculiar to the temple. In the Ekambara Natar of Kanchi, it is the quarrel of the divine couple, the subsequent ordeals of the Goddess and her final wedding to Siva.

It is usually on the seventh day that the apex of the legend is re-enacted (the wedding, the fight against the demon, or Nataraja's dance). On the eighth or the ninth day, Siva comes out as a beggar (Bhikshadana) and goes around the town asking for alms. The last evening procession is done with a huge chariot, the "têr", which is pulled by hundreds of people through the streets which are very crowded, since most people only attend this ritual. At the end, on the tenth day or during an eleventh one, the festival is terminated by a "bath" (tirttavari) of the gods (their symbol...) in the temple's pond. The flag is taken down. Sometimes a "boat festival" is celebrated that last evening, when the utsava murti are taken on a boat on the pond accompanied by singers and musicians.

Throughout the festival, everyone can see the gods when they are taken out in procession, and rejoice in the ever-renewed legend, the subjugation of evil forces, the end of a world and its re-creation, the supremacy of God's grace, the reign of cosmic order, and the loving union of the universe's energies, namely Siva and Devi.

C. The *Ekambara Natar*

This temple is the largest one in Kanchi; it houses an important Tamil linga, which represents one of the five elements, earth (prithvi linga). I took it here as an example of a great South Indian temple, and we will study it in every aspect, from its myths and rituals to its administration.

C1. Myths and history

During the creation of the universe, Siva asked the secret dogmas (the Veda) to take the shape of a mango tree with four branches, and he sat under it, taking the shape of a dazzling linga. Later, since his wife, Lalita, had committed an important mistake, Siva sent her to this linga and tested her by directing all the waters of the world into the Kampai river, which flowed near the mango tree. The river overflowed, and to protect the sand linga that she worshipped, the Goddess had to embrace it tightly, leaving on it forever the marks of her breasts and her arms (hence Siva's Tamil name in this temple: Tajuvakujaindan, "he who melts in the embrace").

Siva, pleased with this demonstration of love, forgave the Goddess and married her again under the mango tree. Thus, he was true to the promise he had given Agastya. (During Siva’s first wedding in the Himalayas, all the gods went to that part of the world which began to sink because of their weight. To restore the world’s balance, the God sent Agastya, a sage who was himself more important than all the gods, to the South. But Siva had to promise Agastya that he would be able to attend the wedding, when it would be performed again there.)

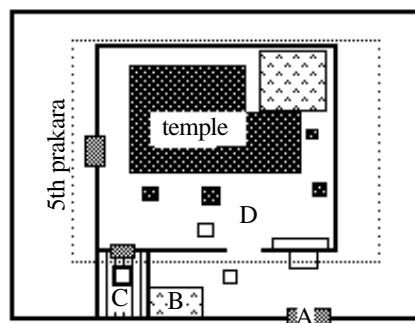
The Ekambara Natar would be situated over an underground river, the Kampai, whose waters are supposed to be visible in a sacred pond lying south of the main sanctuary (see map below). This “secret” inner river is extremely sacred precisely because it cannot be polluted. (I do not know if there is really a river under the temple. Kanchi as a whole is situated over a vast underground sheet of water.)


From the seventh century, the Saiva saints have created songs praising Kanchi and its legends. Thus, we know for certain that the Ekambara Natar was famous already, but it is impossible to be sure when the first shrine was built, since there are no surviving documents. The priests have an oral tradition according to which the linga was originally under the mango tree and was carried inside the first stone temple built by the Pallavas. The place where the linga used to be is now occupied by a slab of stone with a low-relief representing the wedding.

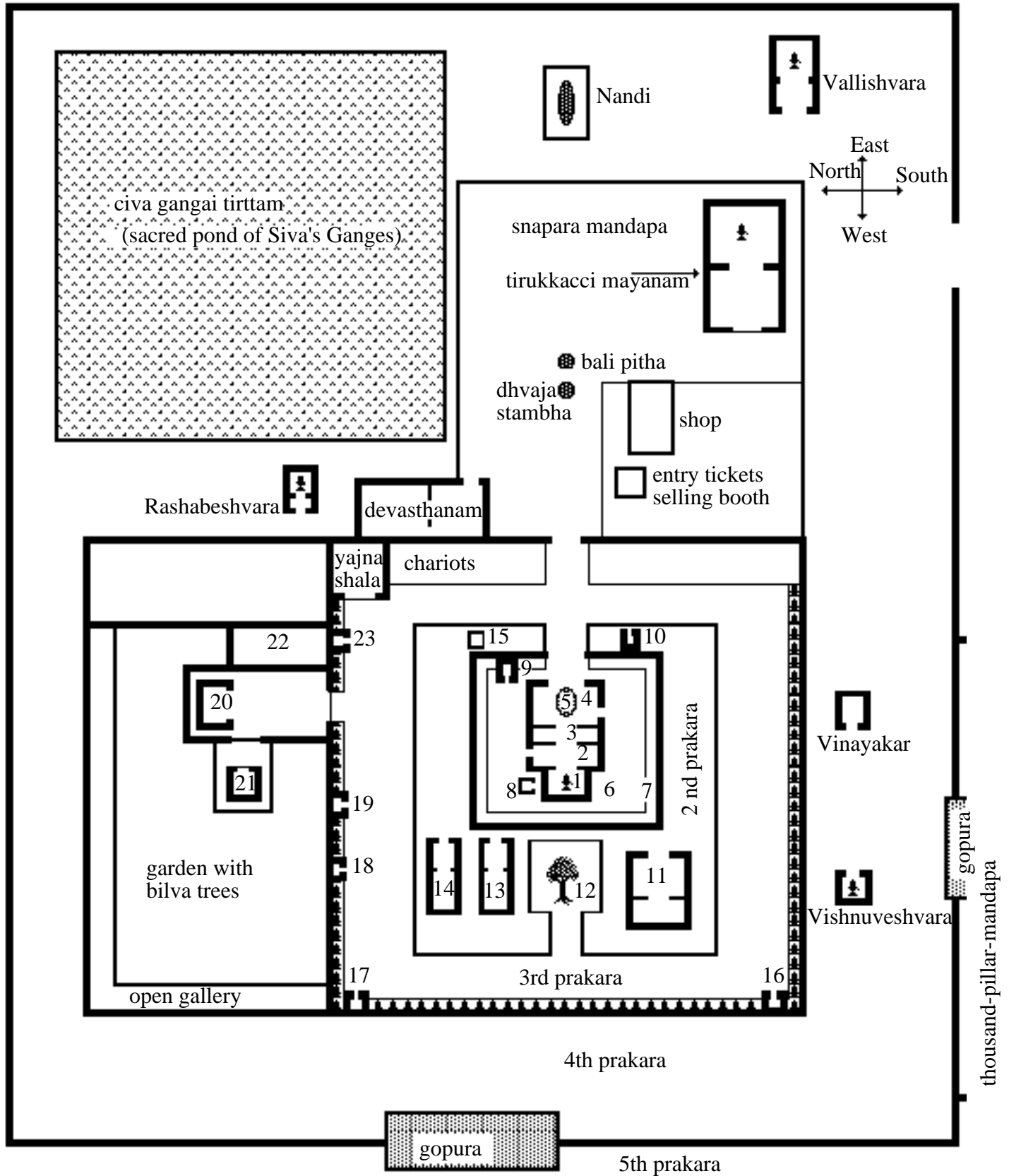
Today only a few scattered stones remain from that Pallava building in the outermost prakara. As it stands now, most of the temple was built by the Cholas from the tenth to the twelfth century, and this is attested to by numerous inscriptions on the walls of the inner prakara. The emperors of Vijayanagar finished the structure by adding the gopura at the very beginning of the sixteenth century.

C2. Visiting the temple.

Plan of the Ekambara Natar temple:



 The area within the dotted line is represented on the next page (whole page).



The small plan page p 63 shows the complete Ekambara Natar temple. The total area is about twenty-four acres. In order to have all the details on the main plan of the preceding page (p 64), I had to cut out the outermost fifth prakara, which is only represented on the smaller plan (p 63).






This smaller plan shows only a few details of great importance:

A = Entrance gopura.

B = sacred pond “Kampai tirtta”, where the waters of the underground river are supposed to flow.

C = mandapa with one thousand pillars, which used to have a smaller mandapa (collapsed in 1988) on top.

D = temple and the four inner prakara, which are detailed on the large plan of p 64:

 pond	differences between levels:
 walls	 not important (1 to 2 feet)
 linga	 important (over 1 yard), inner walls in the sanctuaries

1 = main linga (Tajuvakujaindan) in the garbhagriha (the womb-house)

2 = antarala, antechamber of the sanctum

3 = ardhmandapa, the room “half-way” between God and the devotees

4 = mukha mandapa, room where the devotees usually stand to see the face (mukha) of God

5 = statue of Nandi, Siva’s mount

6 = innermost prakara:

7 = platform along the wall on which there are many statues

8 = sanctuary of Candikeshvara

9 = sanctuary of Vishnu

Second prakara which is not separated from the third prakara by a wall but by a difference of level; it is about three feet higher than the rest of the temple’s floor:

10 = sanctuary of the Goddess of the end of the world (Pralayakalashakti)

11 = sanctuary of Somaskanda (utsava murti)

12 = mango tree “Mavadi” under which weddings are celebrated

13 = Muruga (Mavadikandar, utsava murti)

14 = Goddess (Elavarkujali, utsava murti)

15 = sanctuary of the nine planets (navagraha)

Third parakara. The sanctuaries 16 to 19 and 23 are situated on a platform which runs along the walls of the south, west and north, on which there is also a row of 108 linga.

16 = sanctuary of Vinayakar with five faces (Pancamukha Vinayakar)

17 = 1008-linga-in-one (a huge linga made of 1008 small ones)

18 = bedroom of the Gods when it rains (see 22)

19 = empty cell

20 = sanctuary of Nataraja

21 = old sanctuary of the Goddess (Elavarkujali, utsava murti).

It is not used anymore; she is now in 14

22 =bedchamber of the divine couple. It is here that Siva and Devi are symbolically put at night, but, as for 21, this is partially ruined; this is why when it rains, the Gods sleep in 18.

23 = sanctuary of Bhairava

We enter the Ekambara Natar from the south, where we find on the outer wall of the fifth prakara the imposing gopura built in 1509 by the Vijayanagar emperor Krishna Devarayar (A on the small plan). It is 58,50 meters (193 feet) high. Afterwards, we generally follow the main path which leads to the snapara mandapa (hall of bath), where we enter after having taken a bath in the sacred pond, the Sivagangai tirtta.

On this path, we notice on the left some buildings and a pond. The pond (B on the small map) is the Kampai tirtta, whose legend I mentioned earlier. It is the only place where the underground river shows its pure waters (it was not underground at the time the Goddess worshipped under the mango tree). Behind, we see the one-thousand-pillar mandapa; we can climb to the top of it by a large staircase. In the middle of its roof there used to be a smaller mandapa, the “kalyana mandapa” (hall of auspiciousness) which collapsed in 1988; the whole structure may soon meet the same fate.

In the snapara mandapa, to the right, we find a small closed sanctuary, the “Tirukacci mayanam” (the cremation ground of Kanchi). This reminds us that Kanchi is associated with the destruction of a universe (pralaya) and a new creation.

Then, it is customary to walk directly to the main sanctuary.

The majority of the devotees stop in the mukha mandapa (4 on the main plan) to get a “vision” (darshana) of the God, receive a little holy ash (vibhuti) and waive their hand over the camphor flame which has just been offered to Siva. They remain behind a fence which prevents them from entering further into the sanctum.

The devotees who sponsor a special ritual or who are frequenters of the temple are allowed to go to the antarala (2 on the main plan), the intermediate space between the divine and the world, where the priests stand during the puja - the devotees then go to the ardha mandapa (3). During the offering of food (naivedya), a curtain is pulled between the antarala and the ardha mandapa.

The linga (1) is in the mulasthana (the place of origin), also called garbhagriha (the womb-house), and only the priests can go inside. It is standing under a golden canopy, which is unusual, and has a shape which is said to be similar to that of a banana flower. This linga is in fact an ancient anthill which has been covered by a black substance called "ashta gandha" (eight perfumes) to hold and protect it. It is decorated by a dot of gold which represents its third eye. Its base is covered with silver. During the abhisheka (ritual baths), the liquids are poured only on the "yoni" (pedestal, feminine part of the linga) which is much larger than the linga and is of a very conventional form. Every Friday, the linga is completely covered by a gold ornament which is a representation of Lalita embracing it.

The priest first waives a camphor flame in front of the linga, then he goes behind it and lights the back wall of the sanctum. Emerging out of the darkness, the devotee beholds the God, pictured by a low-relief of Somaskanda.

On their way out, the devotees begin by circumambulating the sanctum clockwise following the first prakara, keeping always one's "pure side", the right, towards the mulasthana (pradakshina). At first they pass by a number of statues on a platform to their left: an alabaster linga, then each of the 63 Saiva saints (Nayanar) first represented in stone then in brass (utsava murti), Vinayakar in the southwest corner, Muruga in the northwest corner and, in between, various "linga from important Indian temples" (all this on 7 in the main plan). The devotees also stop and clap their hands in front of the sanctuary of Candikeshvara (8), a God who is always associated with Siva.

They finish their round of the first prakara by worshipping at Vishnu's sanctuary (9), where they get some sacred water and the "god's feet": the priest puts a copper helmet on their heads on top of which is represented a small pair of shoes (the type ascetics wear).

Leaving the first prakara, the devotees enter an enormous corridor which contains the second and third prakara which are only separated by a difference in level. The second prakara is over a yard higher than the temple's floor and has many rows of columns, which make it look like a mandapa.

In this second prakara, we first find the sanctuary of Pralayakalashakti, “the energy of the destruction of the universe” (10). Afterwards, we reach the sanctuary of the utsava murti Somaskanda (11): we enter a first room in which stands the statue, which must be circumambulated. The south and north walls of the room are covered by mirrors, and the devotee sees the divine couple reflected indefinitely. A curtain hides a back-room in which are kept many other utsava murti.

We then reach the mango tree (12), and we must do a pradakshina of it, after passing in front of a statue representing Somaskanda (the wedding), which marks the place where the linga was before the temple was built. The tree is enormous and almost completely hollow; it has four branches which are supposed to represent the four Veda; each branch gives a different variety of mango and one of them is dead (it would be the atharvaveda). The tree is said to be 3 500 years old.

Afterwards, we visit the sanctuaries of Skanda (Muruga - 13) and a form of the Goddess Lalita, Elavarkujali (14). Finally, we circumambulate the nine planets (navagraha- 15) at least three times.

The third prakara is a vast corridor which is bordered on the right by the platform of the second prakara and on the left by another platform on which stand 108 linga installed by the “rishi” (sages) who came here to witness Siva’s wedding. In the southwest corner, a niche holds a recent statue of Vinayakar (16). Some decades ago, this niche was empty, and it was used to store an utsava murti. As utsava murti thefts became more common, this one was put in a safer sanctuary. The emptiness began to be felt...

A “dharmakarta” (temple trustee) decided to install in the niche a linga, but the priests opposed him, saying that a linga could only be installed for a good reason and that the only motivation of the dharmakarta was to get more prestige for himself. All this led to a court of justice, which ruled in favour of the priests. The niche remained empty...

A few decades ago, another dharmakarta decided to install a statue with 108 linga in one, arguing that it would balance the opposite niche (northwest corner - 17) which holds the 1008-linga-in-one. The priests again opposed it and claimed that the real motive of the dharmakarta was his very own prestige. The man threatened to bypass the temple priests and bring in his own priest to do the consecration and the puja of the new sanctuary. They went to court and, five years later, the case was still awaiting judgement...

The priests then decided to take action, and installed a statue representing Vinayakar with five faces, without saying anything or asking anyone. They argued that this position (southwest corner) in temples is always occupied by a Vinayakar in accord with the prescriptions found in Sanscrit texts. Also, they didn't need anyone else to do the consecration and the rituals. The niche being thus filled, the dharmakarta had to abandon his project and his court case.

We then pass in front of the sanctuary of the 1008-linga-in-one (17). While walking in the northern part of the corridor we notice the God's bedchamber (palli arai -18) and the sanctuary of Bhairava (Siva in a fearsome aspect, also assimilated into a guardian deity of Tamil Nadu, who protects Kanchi as well as every village). We find some steps leading north to the sanctuary where Nataraja (Siva as a cosmic dancer - 23) is enthroned, surrounded by several other utsava murti. To the west, we see a door which is usually kept closed. Beyond, there is a garden where bilva trees (aegle marmelos, whose leaves are consecrated to Siva and used in his puja) grow amidst ruined sanctums and galleries.

While leaving, we pass in front of another closed door which is that of the yajna shala, where are made the consecrations and the pavitra utsava. These rituals are very different from those done to the icons. They are done around a diagram (mandala or yantra); their goal is to concentrate the divine energy into pots (kalasha) and to transfer it eventually to the icons, such as in the kumbhabhisheka (see p 54).

Before leaving the temple, the devotees prostrate themselves in the south of the dvaja stambha and the bali pitha. Men must lie face down and women kneel down and touch the ground with their forehead, always facing north.

Most of the time, the devotees use the stairs laid out at regular intervals between the second and third prakara to walk through both of them at the same time. Then they leave as they came, without circumambulating through the last two prakara. Conscientious pilgrims sometimes walk around the fourth prakara and sit for a little while on the edge of the Siva gangai tirtta.

Nobody ever circumambulates the fifth prakara, which is huge and completely neglected: wild grass and bushes grow there among broken statues and fallen walls. The total surface of the temple is 23 1/2 acres (10 hectares).

C3. Administration

The Ekambara Natar's administration mostly relies on the revenue from lands situated in Madras that are rented for residential or

industrial purposes, as well as from some cultivated fields. To this are added the donations of the devotees who sponsor rituals or who contribute regularly to the expenses of the temple. The revenues have to be considerable because the temple directly or indirectly pays a great number of people. As with almost all the temples of Tamil Nadu, it is under the control of the State through the intermediary of the “Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department” (afterwards: HRCE Dept.), which oversees the administration of temples, and receives for that about 7% of the annual revenue of the larger temples (the smaller ones are often in deficit).

The temple’s management is supervised by local notables called “trustees” or, in Sanscrit, “dharmakarta” (he who does the good, who upholds the Law). They are selected by the HRCE Dept., and they must be changed or reconfirmed every five years.

In 1984, the dharmakarta of the Ekambara Natar had to be renewed, and this brought great confusion: The position is very prestigious and it gives a certain power over the temple, so that there was an extreme competition between the candidates. Unable to make a decision (too many candidates pulled too many strings), the HRCE Dept. simply postponed its choice indefinitely. The temple had to wait until 1989 to have dharmakarta again. Apparently, this did not affect daily administration, but no major repair was done, and when the elephant died, it was not replaced.

The daily administration is now done by HRCE Dept. officials, of whom the most important is the “Executive Officer”. He works in the “devasthanam office”, a word which comes from the Sanscrit “devasthana” (the place where the God stands). With him work about ten other officers from the HRCE Dept. They are in charge of collecting and registering the donations, of making sure devotees pay for the rituals they order and do not enter the shrine beyond what is permitted. They also help arrange the bigger rituals, such as festivals, marriages, etc.

The great temples can be compared to companies, whose production would be “divine grace”. In this perspective, we can say that the dharmakarta form the board of directors representing the shareholders (the only shareholder is in most cases the State of Tamil Nadu); the officers are in charge of the administration and oversee numerous employees: priests, musicians, florists, cooks, singers, cleaning ladies, watchmen and laborers.

The priests have a very complex organization in the temple, which depends on two factors: the nature of the hereditary rights they hold, and the time during which they are allowed to officiate. Since priests

must be married, priesthood rights are inherited, and divided among the descendants by time: for instance, if a man is a priest throughout the year, at his death his two sons will receive priesthood rights of six months each, and so on. Since the original rights have been distributed this way over centuries, most of the priests can only officiate a few days a year.

There are also two types of priesthood: the “normal” one, which is that of the priests who make the regular puja and the devotee’s arcana, and that of those who were in older times the dharmakarta of the temple, and whose ritual duties are only performed during the festivals, especially when it comes to handling the jewels for which they are responsible.

5. Travelling



The vast majority of tourists who go to India do not really see the country. The Taj Mahal, which is indeed an incomparable wonder, the beggars, the palaces of the Maharajas converted into five star hotels, and ruined temples do not account for what is 90% of India: the villages. It is not easy to visit a village, and onlookers are not always welcome at rituals. As soon as we leave the usual “touristy” paths, if we want to go beyond and enter temples, we encounter some mistrust. Nevertheless, “real” India is very welcoming, especially if you respect certain rules.

A. The essential

A1. Starting with the attitude

If Tamil culture has preserved itself throughout time, it is because the Dravidians are proud, and they love their traditions. Thus, it is not really advisable to go there with the feeling you are bringing “Civilization” with you. Indian women find their saris comfortable and elegant, and they will understand you better if you try to wear them rather than if you want to give them jeans.

To anyone who knows how to be humble and to adapt, India is full of friends, of people who will do all that they can to help you. So do not hesitate to wear a “dhoti”, a “lungi” or a sari. As soon as you arrive, anyone will help you to buy such clothes and will teach you how to drape them. In Tamil Nadu, most people speak English, and will be very happy to answer all your questions.

Drink, eat and wear whatever people give you. Food is very often extremely spicy, and if you don't like this, explain it to your host immediately. The drinks you will be offered will be safe, at worst you will get a little diarrhoea against which local doctors and pharmacists (who are very numerous) have potent remedies. As far as the major illnesses are concerned, please note that the Indians are not better immunized against them than you are, and thus they don't drink just anything --at any rate, they will not give you something they consider unsafe!

Since you have been able to afford an airplane ticket at a price most Tamils regard as exorbitant, you are necessarily rich. Do not try to pretend otherwise and behave as if you were poor. Indians despise "hippies" who walk around in shorts and sleep in hotels in which Westerners should not even enter. India is a land of status, know how to respect yours. People expect you to behave as someone of means who knows the finer things of life. You should let yourself be served and have the good taste to wear proper clothing. The best way to be welcomed by Tamils is to accept who you are: a rich Westerner.

Wherever tourism has taken over, as soon as you arrive, a crowd of children surrounds you and asks for pens, coins, stamps, etc. This sorry state of things is entirely due to irresponsible tourists who think they are doing good by accustoming the children of the "third-world" to begging. Please, I implore you, never EVER give anything to a child in the street. I wrote in this book about some places which are very interesting and, happily, unknown to the ordinary tourist. I would like these places to be spared this calamity. If you must have a relationship with these children, let them practice their English beyond the word "baksheesh" by asking their names, their ages, and even maybe their addresses (if you write to them later, they will be very happy).

A2. Health

The health risks you take by going to Tamil Nadu are minimal, no special vaccines are needed. It is wise to take anti-malarial pills, since this disease is rather common (so are mosquitoes), although in a rather mild form which can be cured easily. My advice is not to bring with you a suitcase full of medicine, which will probably be useless, but to trust the local doctors who are cheap, readily available, and who know what virus or bacteria is currently infecting people. They like curing by injections (they will give you pills if you really object), so you might take a couple of disposable seringes with you. In most cases, they'll put you back in shape in no time. If the worse happens, the

Vellore hospital has an excellent reputation.

Keep in mind that South India is not very far from the Equator, so the sun shines with great intensity. The weather is always warm, between 25° C (80° F) and 30° C (90° F) year-round, except from April to June, during the “summer”, where it can easily go beyond 40° C (105° F). Thus, sunstrokes and sunburns are to be feared, and wearing a hat is not the solution: it keeps your head hot. The best way to protect yourself is to stay under a black cotton umbrella which you can buy there. Rain is rare and never lasts very long, but when it falls, the streets become rivers until the sun dries them up.

A3. Transportation

If you have to change planes before you reach Madras, Delhi is better than Bombay. The best way to arrive is by a direct flight to the splendid and quiet Madras airport. It is modern, clean and well-organized. The customs officials are very well-equipped to see what is in your luggage, but they rarely bother tourists. A shuttle bus is just outside and will take you to the main hotels, and unless you love bargaining, it is a better way to go to the city than taking a taxi.

Just outside the airport, there is a main road on which you can find “normal” busses to Madras almost immediately. Busses go everywhere in Tamil Nadu and are very frequent. This means of transportation is not exactly comfortable, but it is practical. It goes to every town and almost every village, travels on the main roads and the smaller paths, and is very cheap!

There are busses which are more direct than others. Be very careful about that. For instance, between Madras and Kanchi there are busses leaving every five minutes, but some take twice as long to reach Kanchi than others. The 76B line is the most direct, the 79 takes the longest (it passes through cute villages). If you say to the driver of the 79 you want to go to Kanchi, he will tell you to enter his bus without warning you about the detour... So be circumspect and learn beforehand the number of the bus you want to take. There are “express” busses which are more comfortable and usually have their own separate bus stand in the main cities. In the “normal” bus stands, you also have “point-to-point” (direct) busses for the major cities. I will detail some bus routes later.

Trains are only practical for long distances, for which it is more convenient to take the plane anyway. Trichy, Madurai, Tirupati and many other cities of South India are linked to Madras by daily flights which are not very expensive.

Taxis are relatively expensive but comfortable. You will easily find some to take you wherever you want, even if it takes several days. In 1991, the charge was 300 rupees a day, including everything, from Kanchi; it might have been a little more expensive from Madras or from other tourist centers. If you really want to go to villages and see the countryside, I strongly advise you to take a taxi. With a little luck, the driver will take you to his own village!

In the cities, the easiest way to move around is the “rickshaw”. In Madras the “auto-rickshaws” have a meter. Insist that they put it on after agreeing on paying a little more than the stated price. In the smaller towns, the “cycle-rickshaws” are more common. Many Westerners feel uncomfortable by the thought of being pulled by a pedalling man. Please keep in mind that these “pedallers” are often better off than the laborers who work in the fields, bending down all day in the water of the rice fields. They will be happy to serve you, knowing that they can easily cheat you out of a couple of rupees. The prices are very low, about 2 to 3 rupees per kilometer in 1991. Do not refuse to pay a little more than this, up to twice the normal price, your status as a rich foreigner calls for it. Nevertheless, do bargain and take advantage of the competition. Some rickshaws always ask enormous prices from tourists (these are usually concentrated around tourist centers such as the main hotels, famous temples, etc.); in this case, the best thing is to walk away until you find an honest driver, so as to discourage such practices.

You can also easily rent a bike, but the roads of Tamil Nadu are very, very far from being good. If you want to amaze Tamils, show them that, contrary to what they believe, Westerners know how to walk.

A4. Books

There are numerous guides of India, each with its own special outlook. Some will give you addresses of cheap hotels and not worry too much about culture. I recommend “India: a travel survival kit”, published by “Lonely Planet”, which has a lot of maps and many interesting details (though their map of Kanchi is inaccurate).

For more accurate information, I suggest you read some of the books in my bibliography. Most of them are scholarly works through which you can begin to explore India’s culture in your armchair.

B. Beyond tourism

B1. Off the beaten paths

It is not very easy to visit a village. The best way is not to take a bus and stop at a pretty little hamlet: people will think you are crazy. You have to go with someone who knows the place and its inhabitants. Thus, it is important to meet a person who will be able to take you to the countryside. There are two sorts of people who will help you the most: those belonging to the dominant castes and those who serve you.

Each region has a special economic activity through which you can define the dominant castes. In Kanchi, those are the silk and textile manufacturers and wholesalers. In the agricultural regions, they are often the landowners. Nothing is easier than to meet them: they are as curious about you as you are about them. We will see more of that later.

Even the stiffest tourist meets natives. In hotels, a crowd of cleaning ladies, “room-boys”, and others serve him. It is not forbidden to talk to these servants and, after some resistance (they are often quite shy and not used to being treated with respect), they will take you to their villages and, with simplicity, will help you discover their beliefs, rituals and culture. The mere fact you are interested in them should make them trust you, although you will never convince them that they really deserve your interest (don’t forget that what is exotic for you is what is ordinary for them and vice-versa).

In case you are really shy, I mention in this book some villages where a temple will be your alibi. Without a doubt, the most beautiful village is Tiru Alangadu, which has an historically interesting temple and also sandy streets lined with low traditional houses where, in the evening, you will see farmers returning from the fields with their ploughs on their shoulders. I will tell you in detail later why you should visit it and how to get there.

At any rate, it is not advisable to begin your tour of the Tamil countryside from Madras. Kanchi or Pondicherry are better bases for your explorations.

B2. The temples

Normally, it is forbidden to non-Hindus to go inside the inner prakara of Hindu temples. Having faced the fanaticism of Muslims and

Christians, Hindus have realized that their religion is not regarded with respect by most Westerners, and it makes them unhappy. Before Independence, only “touchable” castes were allowed to enter the temples. When temples were opened to all castes, this rule provided the framework for the exclusion of non-Hindus, and especially Western tourists whose jeering or mocking eyes are not really welcome.

Being Hindu, I understand why non-Hindus are not allowed in temples. I do not wish otherwise; I do not want people who do not respect my religion to be admitted where we pray. On the other hand, if you truly wish to have the spiritual experience of the darshan and if you want to pray (whatever your religion and just as Hindus do not hesitate to pray or meditate in churches), I will give you some advice to help you enter temples and have the vision of God.

First of all, there are many temples in which no one will object to your coming in. The most interesting will be listed under each town. Those are usually very small and belong to lower castes. Notably, the Goddess is powerful enough to punish those who would make fun of her in her temples, which are open to everyone, except that of Kamakshi in Kanchi and Minakshi in Madurai.

But what is really interesting is to experience a great temple. There, guards protect the entrance and make sure that no non-Hindu gets in. If you have a pure heart and if you are coming with offerings (which can be bought at the gate), you might be lucky, especially if you are accompanied by Indians (practice this in the temples I call “theoretically forbidden to non-Hindus”). Recently, thanks to Siva appearing in the West and in Hawaii, the idea that Westerners come to temples to pray, or at least with respect, has become common in Tamil Nadu. Sometimes, you will even be encouraged to go inside, especially if you follow my advice:

I strongly advise you to dress the Indian way and, for women, to wear a red dot on your forehead. This red dot, called “pottu” in Tamil, shows your identification with the Goddess and can be worn by anyone except widows. Traditionally, it is made of a red powder, “kumkum”, that will be given to you in sanctuaries of the Goddess. Nowadays, you also find these dots ready-made and self-sticking in assorted colors. Less visible, the “vibhuti” or sacred ash must be worn by everyone; it comes from the worship of Siva.

If you want to be well thought of, do not bring a camera at first. If you want to take pictures, always ask permission, which will be given to you, but only for the outer prakara: it is very strictly forbidden to photograph the sanctuaries.

Before going to the temple take a shower and put on clean clothes (Indians change their clothes at least once a day). Women are not admitted when they have their period. Leaving your shoes, your worries and bad thoughts outside, you should first worship Vinayakar which stands by the gate. Then walk straight towards the God who shines in the darkness. Whatever the shape of the icon, it is a manifestation of the divine energy, and if you open your heart, you will have the vision, the grace. You can pray in any way you like, God will take whatever you feel most comfortable doing, and you can even sing if you desire. The only thing you cannot do is dance: since 1947, it is unfortunately forbidden. On your way out, circumambulating the prakara will let you absorb the experience while going back into the world. As you are leaving, sit for a while near the bali pitha, facing north; prostrate yourself before standing up and going away.

The priest who performs a ritual for you expects you to leave him a little money in the plate used for the camphor. Tamils are rather stingy when it comes to giving something to these priests who are often poor and dedicated... I recommend anything from 2 to 10 rupees (1991), depending on what the priest does: sometimes he will tell you the legend of the temple or give you a little extra. In some rare temples where tourists are common, the priest might ask you for a huge sum. Do not hesitate to remind him that it is forbidden by his religious texts to ask for money. They have to take whatever you give them without attempting to bargain or, worse, requiring anything from you (which is why they're poor). Be generous but try not to get cheated, and if you are asked for money, be firm and scold the greedy priest.

You will find in every temple "hundi", boxes in which you can anonymously put money for the temple's expenses. It is charitable, but if you want to give money, it is best to let it be known and control its uses: the devathanam office will be glad to receive your donation and you will be able to specify what it should be used for (repairs, for instance). They will even give you a beautiful receipt in Tamil which will make a great souvenir.

As for the festivals, the dates are set according to the lunar calendar, so that they are different each year. Everybody has a festival calendar and will tell you when you arrive what you should do and see. The temples of the Goddess are best visited on Fridays, those of Siva on Mondays and those of Muruga on Tuesdays. The main temples are open from dawn to noon, then from 4 PM to 9 PM (approximately). The best hours for visiting are at sunset.

B3.... and the rest...

There is much to discover in Tamil culture. In Madras, you will easily find performances of “Bharata natyam” to go to. Films can also be interesting, and if you have the opportunity to watch a video, ask to see “vedam pudidu”, a great movie on caste and village life... (have someone translate the dialogues which are important). You can also see craftsmen sculpt or weave according to very ancient techniques. The rest of this book will describe all of this, town after town, village after village, giving you hints to explore many fascinating places. From the obvious to the secret, from the ancient legends to the modern trends, you will find here guide-posts which are far from being exhaustive.

Please note that I rarely give precise addresses. The names of the streets are almost never indicated, and when you want to go somewhere, just ask people or take a rickshaw who knows where it is (in Madras, first go to the area by bus, and then ask a rickshaw). Indians rarely use addresses. One day, I was looking for the house of a famous singer, but once I was in his neighbourhood, nobody knew the name of the street he lived on, however, everybody knew where his house was.

C. Charity

Although India is very far from being the poorest country on earth, and although there are no more famines and the economy is rather good, it remains for the Western world the archetype of “third world” misery. The Indians, who do not like to show off too much these days, look poor even when they are rich. And, of course, there are the beggars crowding the tourist centers...

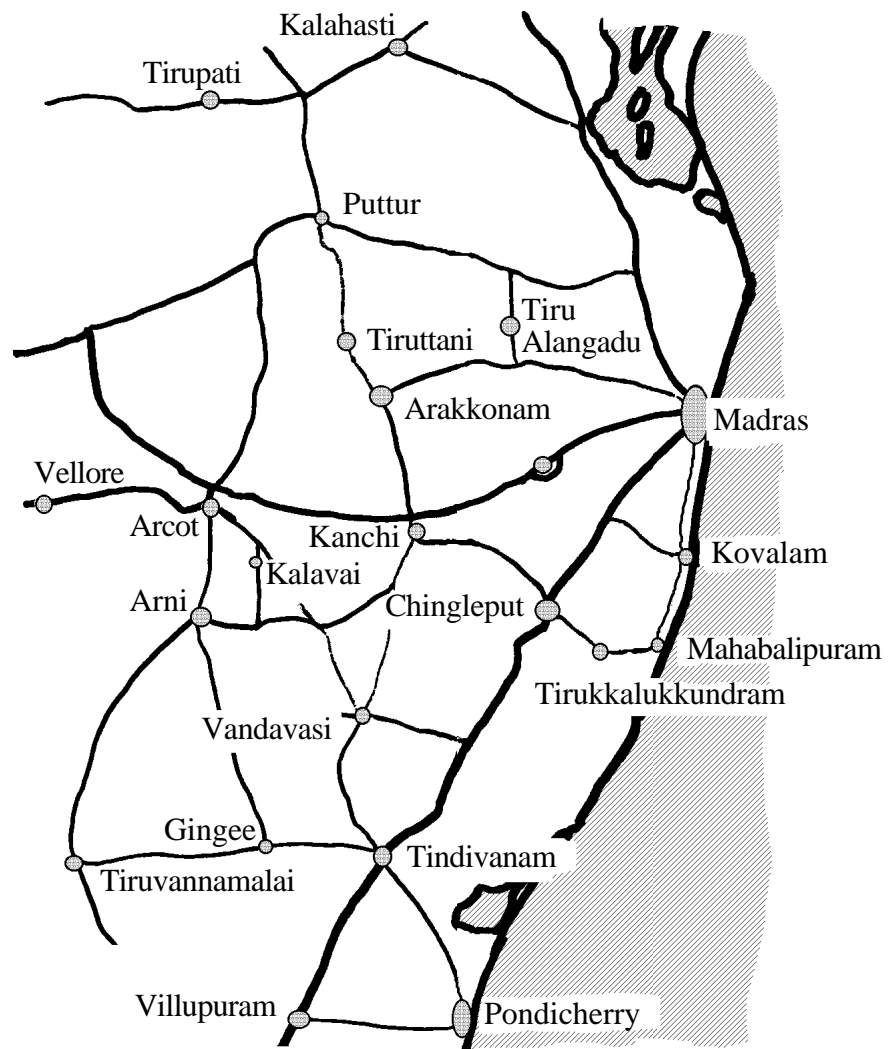
So start by being cautious. Once the tourist busses are gone, I see most beggars, especially the children, walk back quietly to their houses in the neighbouring streets. The true beggars rarely get up to run after you. They wait at the entrances of the temples and always belong to one of these three categories: older women, widows or former temple dancers whom the law has deprived of their job and their self-respect; handicapped people; and sanyasin or other types of “sages”. They often have a house and can ask food from any housewife in town, no one would refuse to give them alms.

The true beggars of Kanchi know me well. Once a woman who is not very old (I suspect she is a former dancer) and watches over my

shoes at the entrance of the Kacchabeshvara, made me notice her torn, worn-out clothes, and asked if I could give her a sari. I had a good sari whose colors had run, but which was still quite nice. I gave it to her and was surprised in the following days when I noticed she didn't wear it. Finally, I asked her why she did not put it on, and what she had done with it. "I'm keeping it for when I have to go out", she said. "But you are out right now!" I answered. "No, if I wear it now, what will I have for when I must dress up?", she said, gently smiling. Here, beggars are not necessarily homeless or antisocial, and sometimes they have to attend ceremonies. I should have guessed.

So, be circumspect and do not give anything to anyone. Please, I implore you again, NEVER give anything to children! If you want to do something really useful, apart from giving a few coins to the regular temple beggars, go through a charitable organization, the best of which were founded and are managed by Indians. Almost all of these Indian organizations are run by volunteers, and through them your money will go entirely to its goal, unlike what happens with many Western charitable organizations. If you meet people from dominant castes, ask them if they know of a village needing a well, or a poor student who cannot stay in school for want of the equivalent of a few dollars.

6. The Tondaimandalam



A. Madras

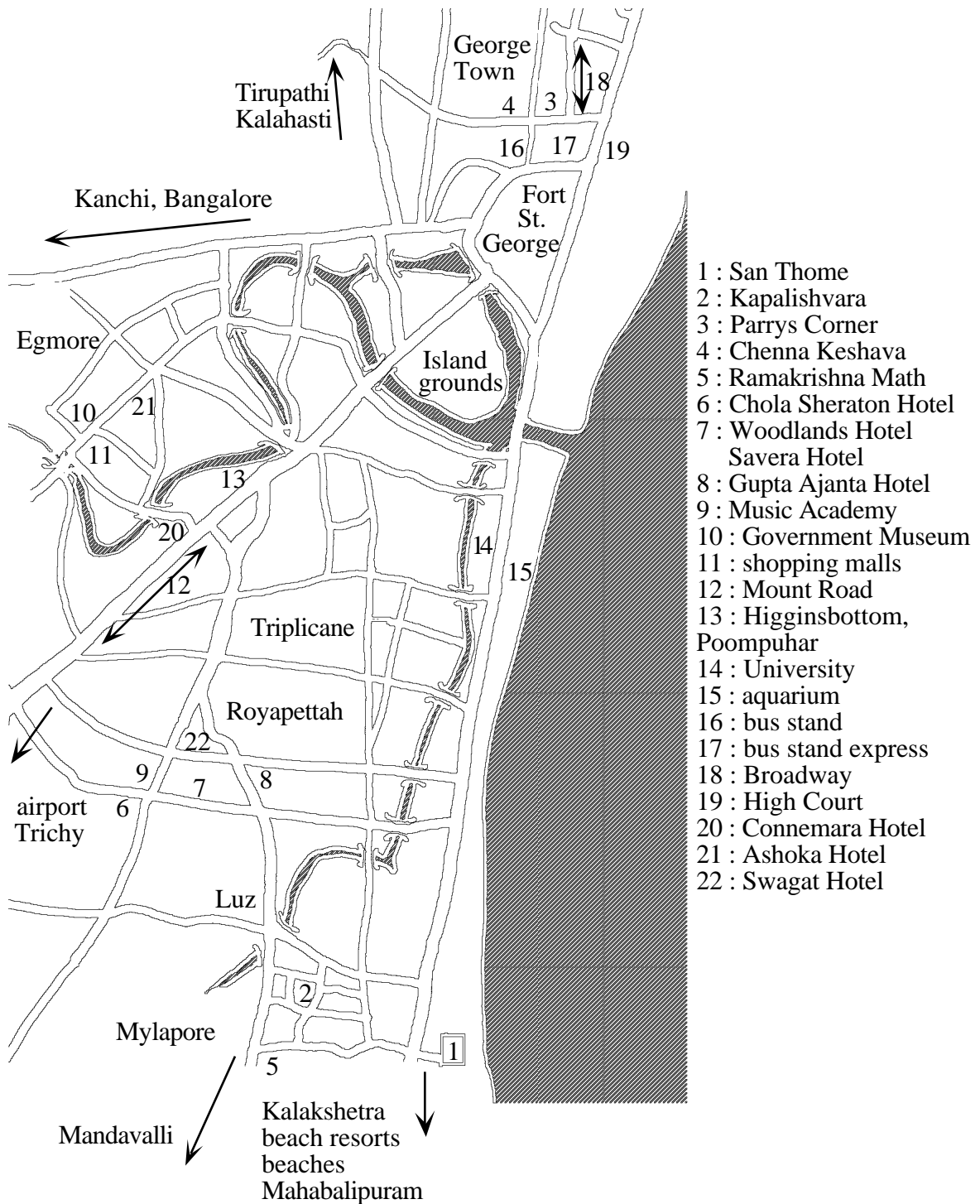
A1. What to see

If you want to visit Tamil Nadu, you must go through Madras, its capital. This city is well worth your attention and has numerous famous and secret places to visit. It was in the seventeenth century that the English established a small settlement to the north of San Thome, a Christian town ruled by the Portuguese where the supposed remains of Saint Thomas (from the Gospel) lie, and the city of Mailapur (now called Mylapore) which is famous for its temple dedicated to Siva who is holding a skull, the Kapalishvara.

Today, Madras has grown so much that it includes Mylapore, San Thome and many other small towns within its limits. It became the capital of the Madras Presidency, a state created during the British Raj which covered most of South India and corresponded more or less to the Dravidian land. Since Independence, it is the capital of Tamil Nadu and remains the most important city of the Deccan.

You can still visit the original English fort, which now contains a small, uninteresting museum, and the Department of Archeology, among other government buildings. The old Indian town, called Chennai in Tamil, stretches to the north. It is where you will find the main bus stands and crowded bazaars, especially "Parrys Corner". If you are adventurous you can walk through the small alleys which lead to the north (do not go there if it rains...) and where you will find numerous ancient temples, notably the Chenna Keshava Perumal, behind the "Flower Market", which is open to all.

Mylapore is clearly easier to live in and more interesting, although the entry to the Kacchabeshvara is strictly forbidden to foreigners (you can always visit the outer prakara). Immediately to the south of this temple you will find a smaller temple which is far more welcoming. This neighbourhood is famous for its jewelers and the Luz Bazaar, and there are numerous small cheap hotels. Near the temple's pond, you can see a pretty vegetable market. Many artists live there, attracted by the several cultural institutions, such as the "Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan" which frequently organizes cultural performances and the "Ramakrishna Math", a monastery which includes a dispensary and a concert hall.



Immediately to the north of Mylapore we find the richest part of the city, Royapettah, famous for its great hotels such as the Chola Sheraton and the Woodlands. If you are looking for a more typical and cheaper hotel, try the Gupta Ajanta, which has interesting “Art Deco” architecture. Close to all these hotels, you will find the “Music

Academy” which always presents great concerts and dance performances.

The North Indians who emigrated to Madras gathered in what is becoming its most chic neighbourhood, Egmore. It is where you will find the Government Museum, which holds a beautiful collection of bronze statues, objects from the most ancient civilizations of India and an interesting ethnographic exhibition. Right across the street from the Museum, there are American-inspired shopping malls which sell goods from North India, such as you will not find elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Some very chic hotels have opened there recently.

The “center” of Madras is Mount Road, a large road which stretches through the city from north to south. There you will find numerous shops: if you are looking for books or maps, try the famous Higginsbottom, the largest bookshop in town; for souvenirs, Poompuhar and many similar government shops will have all sorts of objects made by local craftsmen; the best shops for photographic equipment, banks, and the main Post Office are also situated on this main road. But keep in mind that many tourists shop there, hence prices are not exactly the cheapest; it is best to wait until you are in the small towns where the craftsmen live to buy souvenirs.

Since there was no room for Madras to expand to the north, the main institutions created in this century are to the the south. There you can visit the main center of the “Theosophical Society”, and a park dotted with various, totally uninteresting memorials and also a small zoo. Further down is “Kalakshetra” (the field of arts), a famous institution where traditional Indian arts are taught and which organizes prestigious performances.

Leaving the city and following the coast to the south, we reach the most bizarre tourist attraction, the V.G.P. Golden Beach Resort, the Tamil equivalent of Disneyland. V.G.P., a Tamil industrial tycoon, wanted to honour his Dravidian culture - though his vision resembles that of an Indian fantasy movie, and the film industry uses his resort as a background to numerous love scenes. Do not hesitate to visit the palaces of the Cholas in concrete covered with stucco, the garden with the great Indian myths realized in plaster, and the surrealistic vision of a modern Dravidian soul reflecting on its past.

Finally, the beach... Madras is on a beach which stretches from the southernmost end of India to Calcutta. Take a walk there at sunrise or at sunset, with the Indians, who rarely swim and feel they are already too tanned.

A2. Practical details

Busses:

- The busses leaving town are all in Parrys Corner, where you will find the “normal” (mofussil bus stand) and the “express” bus stands, just across the street from each other.

- Town busses:

3A: Parrys - Royapettah (Music Academy) - Mylapore

4: Tondiarpet - Mount Road - Royapettah (Music Academy) - Mandavalli

13: T. Nagar - Royapettah (Lloyds Road) - Triplicane

17A, 17E: Parrys - Tiru Valluvar Kottam - film studios

18: goes through Mount Road from Parrys to the Airport

A19: Parrys (Broadway) - Kovalam, beach resorts

B19: Parrys (High Court) - Injambakkam, beach resorts

19M: Parrys (High Court) - Royapettah (Ajanta) - Luz - Mylapore - Mandavalli - Adyar - Tiruvanmiyur

21: Parrys - Mount Road - Royapettah (Ajanta) - Luz - Mylapore - Mandavalli

21D, 21E: Parrys - Madras beach - South of the city

21N: Parrys - Madras Beach - Mandavalli

23: Egmore (Museum) - Adyar

23A: Egmore (Museum) - Royapettah - Tiruvanmiyur

One-day tours:

- Kalahasti, Tirupati

- Kalakshetra - Tiruvanmiyur (ancient temple) - V.G.P. Golden Beach Resort

- Mahabalipuram - Tirukkalukundram

Hotels:

Expensive:

- Connemara Hotel, close to Mount Road

- In Royapettah: Hotel Chola Sheraton, Hotel Savera

Correct:

- In Egmore, close to the Museum: Hotel Ashoka

- In Royapettah: Gupta's Ajanta, Hotel Swagath

Beach resorts:

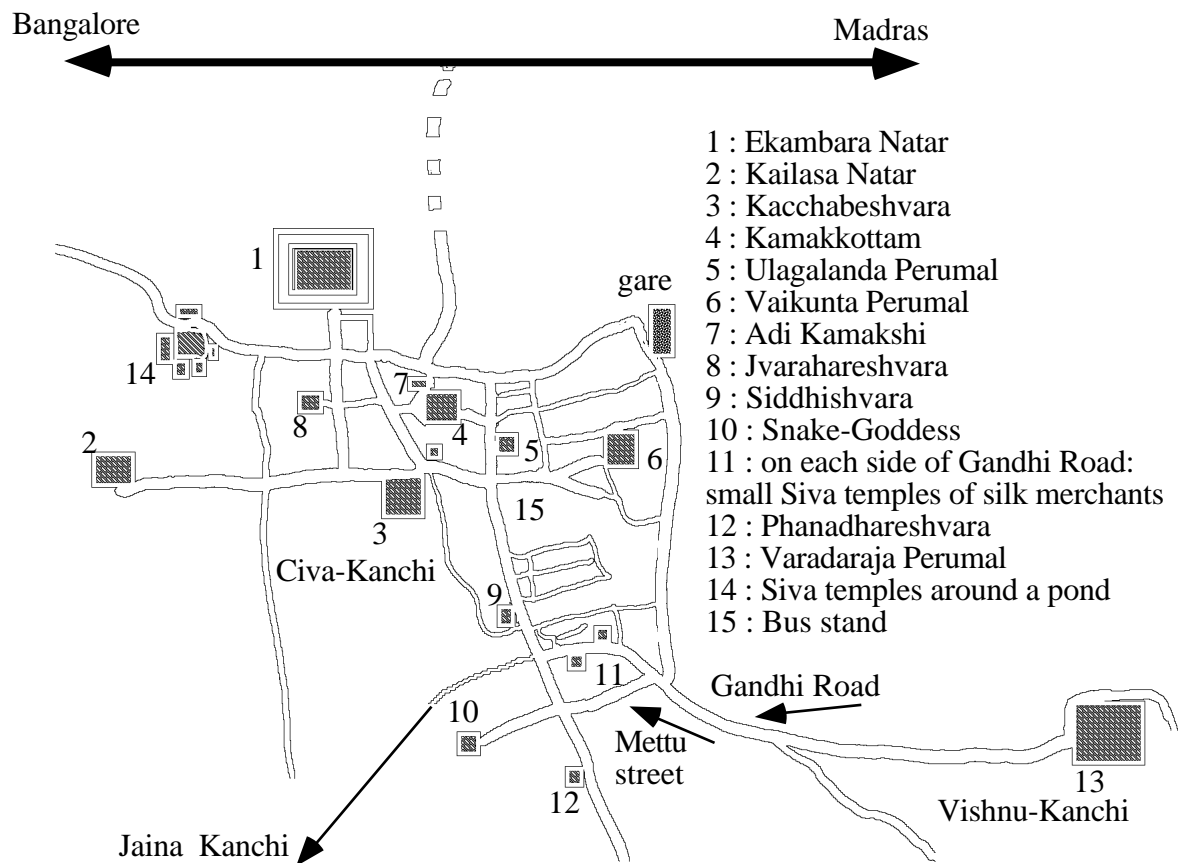
- Fishermen's cove, Kovalam

- V.G.P. Golden Beach Resort, East Coast Road, Injambakkam

B. Kanchipuram

B1. The holy town

There are two hundred temples to visit... but I will only mention a dozen, to allow you enough time to see the weavers who are the local craftsmen. The typical tourist does not spend more than half a day in Kanchi, running through two or three main temples and stopping in a sari shop which has nothing to do with the famed manufacturers. So keep in mind that Kanchi is mostly spared the usual calamities that tourism brings, and, please, keep it that way!



- The Kailasa Natar, built in the eighth century, is the main tourist attraction. You will even find there a “guide” from the Department of Archeology. He will show you some of the most interesting sculptures and paintings. What tourists do not know, is that this temple is open to non-Hindus and that priests are very welcoming. Go there at five in the evening to see the puja.

- The Ekambara Natar. Although theoretically forbidden to non-Hindus, this temple lets worshippers enter, even if they're foreigners; try coming with offerings. After all that you have read about it, you should want to visit it!

- The Kacchabeshvara. Tourists never visit this temple, so its officials do not have a definite policy about foreigners. With the right attitude, you should be welcome. It is a very quiet place, full of a peace propitious to meditation. In the outermost prakara you will find some very small and ancient temples (behind the pond), two entwined trees under which women worship Naga-stones (northwest corner) and a temple dedicated to Kali (southwest corner). This temple was built with the stones of a Buddhist building. If you are careful, you might notice its remains.

- The Kamakkottam. Foreigners are strictly forbidden to enter, which is unfortunate because inside you would see the grave of Shankara and some very interesting sculptures (besides the imposing Goddess...). Visit it on a Friday about 7 p.m. to see a procession of the Goddess on a golden chariot. Since many tourists come here, you will find many "guides" you'd rather avoid.

- Adi Kamakshi temple, also called Kali temple. According to the legend, this is the original temple of the Goddess Kamakshi, whom Shankara would have moved to the Kamakkottam. Its rituals are done by Saiva priests, which is unusual. More quiet and ancient than the Kamakkottam, it is also far more welcoming.

- The Vaikunta Perumal. From the same period as the Kailasa Natar, this temple has very interesting architecture and the sanctuary is decorated with superb pillars shaped as standing lions, but unfortunately it is forbidden to non-Hindus (tourists never go there, so you may try your luck). Anyway, the exterior is worth the visit.

- The Javrahareshvara. This little-known temple has beautiful and unusual architecture. It is well worth seeing, even though it may be hard to find. It is open only for a little while in the evening. If you go there when a priest is in and the door is open, your mere interest in it should gain you entrance.

- The Siddhishvara. A very small temple whose linga is growing. It belongs to a family who lives next to it and will help you visit it.

- The Varadaraja Perumal. Only a beautiful mandapa, with one hundred pillars and built in the sixteenth century, is open to tourists. It contains sculpture at its best, just before it became too ornate. Since it is "touristy", it's fenced off and you have to pay to enter... What tourists cannot see is the inside of the temple itself, which has several

sanctuaries linked by halls that seem like a mysterious labyrinth. It is built covering a small hill, and has an unusual shrine dedicated to gold and silver lizards. Try to gain entrance.

- Jaina Kanchi. The temples of this hamlet, which is a little outside and to the southwest of Kanchi, are very interesting not only for their architecture, but also because they are Jain. One is from Pallava times and the other, the Varthamanir, contains splendid paintings on the ceiling. Completely ignored by tourists, you will have no problem visiting them, providing you can find the priest who keeps their keys. Your coming to the hamlet should provoke enough commotion to make him come out and meet you.

- The temple to the Snake-Goddess. Open to all, this is a superb and ancient Devi temple, with a sacred anthill in front of it where cobras are supposed to live. However, ants, and cobras for that matter, have abandoned it for a long time. Go there on a Friday evening. Notice a Buddha statue under a tree.

B2. The silk industry

When you have had enough of temples, you can turn your interest towards textile manufacturers. Cotton and silk weaving are very famous here, and are said to be of the best quality in India. They are done in small weavers' villages all around the city.

The "manufacturers", who are members of the dominant castes, buy raw cotton or silk, dye it, and then give it to a weaver with whatever is necessary for them to make the brocade. They give enough to weave three "normal" saris (6 yards) or two long saris (9 yards), which will be of the same color and have the same brocade pattern. After two weeks to a month, the weaver comes back to the manufacturer with the saris which are weighed (to see if the weaver used all the yarn that was given to him) and carefully examined. If the work is good, the weaver is then paid. The saris are sold wholesale by the manufacturer.

Thus, what is interesting in Kanchi is to visit these manufacturers and persuade them to take you to visit a weavers' village, while explaining how all this is done. Happily, tourists are all taken to retail shops on Gandhi Road, where they will be sold saris which are cheaper than those from Kanchi. Do not listen to the touters who will try to take you to such shops (and NEVER to the real manufacturers). Most of the manufacturers live on Mettu Street. They work from their houses and do not have shop-windows. Outside their door, a simple sign saying "silk cloth and lace merchant" will indicate that's where you

have to go. It is impossible for me to recommend one of them: explore until you find one who will agree to answer your questions and help you. This should not be very difficult, although you have to keep in mind that they're not used to dealing with tourists, that many do not speak English and that their saris are EXPENSIVE (but of the highest quality). With a little luck, you will end up with some friends as well.

The same people own the lands and the industries, so if you wish to visit a farm or a rice mill, all you have to do is ask them.

B3. Practical details

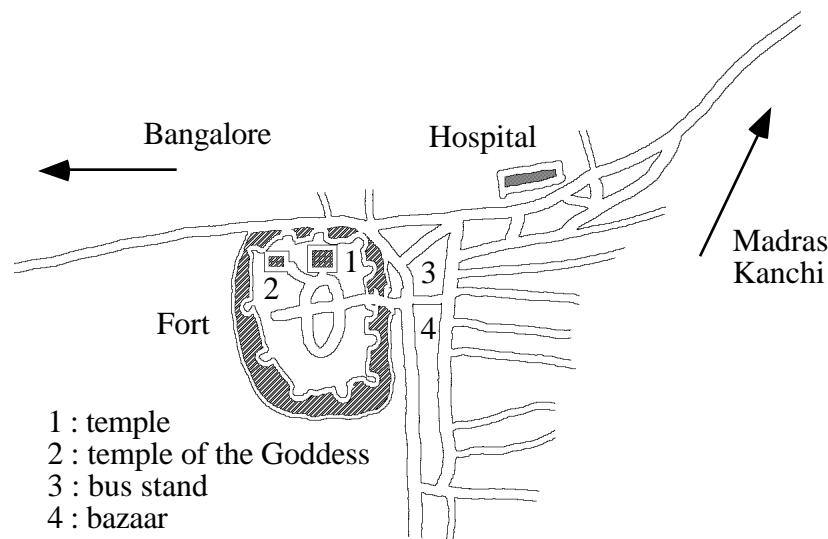
From Madras, take the 76B. There are two "point-to-point" busses per hour, and many others that only stop in a few towns on the way.

Here are some suggestions for one-day trips for which it is best to hire a taxi, since you do not really want to lose time and end up spending the night in a small village with no hotel:

- Vellore - Kalavai
- Tiruttani - Tiru Alangadu
- Tirukkalukkundram - Mahabalipuram

Hotels: Hotel Babu, near the Vaikunta Perumal temple, is of good quality. For cheaper "lodges", try those around the Bus Stand.

C. Vellore



During the Vijayanagar Empire, this city became the capital of the Vice-Royalty. Afterwards it became part of a small Islamic kingdom which was centered in Arcot, a nearby town, which explains why even

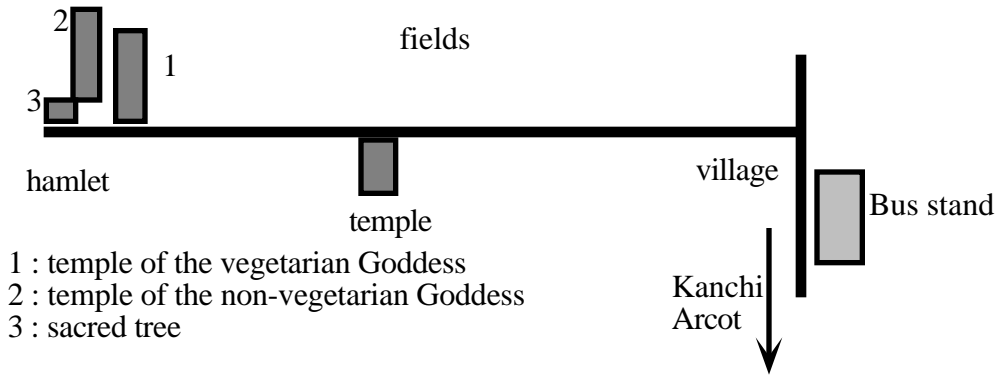
today there is a strong concentration of Muslims in this area. Its main temple, the Jalagandishvara, was shut down by the Muslims and finally re-opened and re-consecrated in 1982, against the opposition of the Department of Archeology that wanted to keep it for tourists (who never go to Vellore, anyway...) because of its splendid architecture. I strongly advise you to visit it, which you can do in half a day from Kanchi. Busses between Kanchi and Vellore are very frequent, with sometimes a change in Arcot.

The temple is situated in a fort, whose fortifications were built by the Vijayanagar emperors (the exterior ones, below, with the typical Indian shape) and the Muslim kings (the interior ones, on top of which you can walk). The temple itself is a great example of simple and beautiful architecture, and it used to be surrounded by moats as well. Anyone can enter. When leaving, turn right and after you pass the corner of the temple, turn right again and walk until you find the gate to a police station. Go into the courtyard. Inside, under a huge banyan tree, there is the most beautiful anthill I have ever seen. This temple of the Goddess, sheltered by majestic trees, some of which have “faces”, is somehow magical. Do not miss it.

D. Kalavai

You can visit this little village in the afternoon, after leaving Vellore where one morning is enough. This place is rarely on maps. It is famous for having been chosen by one of the Shankaracharya to live, and, mostly, for its Goddess temples where people with incurable illnesses go to be exorcised. The temples are situated about 2 or 3 kilometers (2 miles) away from the bus stand, in a separate hamlet. If you do not have a car, take a rickshaw, although the distance is easily walkable. But keep in mind that at night all sorts of animals stroll about on this countryside road, like cobras for instance...

There are two identical temples. One, the most frequented and least developed architecturally, is “non-vegetarian”: devotees sacrifice chickens (which is strictly forbidden by law...). The other temple is “vegetarian” and more accessible since its priest is a sanyasin who has vowed never to speak, but who understands and writes English fluently. He will happily answer all your questions, and if you ask him, he will even allow you to take pictures, even in the sanctum (which is really exceptional)! Please remember to ALWAYS ask first.



Needless to say, the possessed women, the huge statue of the Goddess lying on the ground, and the rituals of exorcism are all good subjects for great photos. Just out of the temples, you will find an anthill under a tree which is also interesting. This little village is well worth the trouble of getting there.

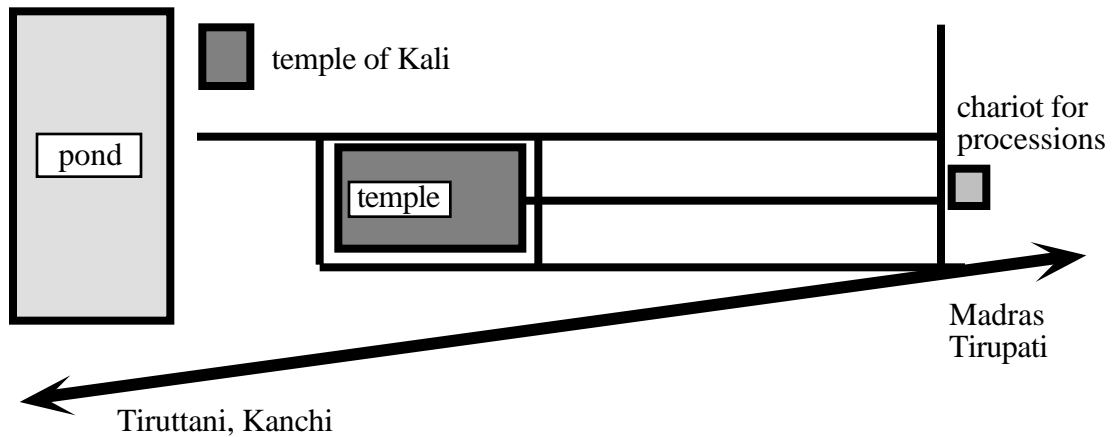
E. Tiru Alangadu

This small charming village is unknown to tourists, but was selected by Siva for his dance, when it was still a cremation ground. The great saint Karaikkalammaiyar wrote her powerful hymns there in the sixth century:

“8. Thanks to a peregrination through towns and countries
 and thanks to good behavior, they had improved themselves
 those who, coiled, are lying dead among old cadavers
 where the crowd of flocking devils grows ceaselessly.
 And the forest and the sea and the mountain and the earth
 And the sky keep on spinning, whereas, the fire
 in his hand, snakes hissing, he dances, our
 Father (Siva) whose abode is Tiru Alangadu.

.....
 11. He cannot be compared. The devils gather,
 hit each other, shout with joy
 and disperse. The partridge sings.
 The fox with his howl accompanies him like a lute.
 In Tiru Alangadu where he is the ornament,
 The devil from Karikal with matted hair
 Sings his praises in these verses in good Tamil.
 Whoever recites them
 will reach the paradise of Siva and be happy.”
 (From: Kârâvêlane, 1956, p 37)

The saint is venerated as being seated at Siva's feet, accompanying his dance with her cymbals. It is interesting to note that in her time, the religious movement she represents, the passionate devotion to Nataraja, was not really developed. As I said earlier, she is thought to be the first who ever wrote on this subject. Keep in mind that according to the legend, she is still here!



It is doubtless true that this little village has been a place of worship since very ancient times, but the present temple dates back at most to the tenth century, and seems a little bit out of proportion to the few houses surrounding it. The temple dedicated to Kali is to be seen first. It is behind the Siva temple, close to a splendid pond. The statue of the Goddess seems extremely ancient. Of course, it is a representation of the Devi who lost her challenge with Nataraja, when she acknowledged her defeat, but was not exactly happy about it...



The Siva temple has a traditional sanctum with a linga and another sanctuary, facing south, dedicated to Nataraja who is standing in the posture thanks to which he won the challenge: lifting his leg straight up towards the sky. This posture seem to have been preferred to the well-know posture, in which one leg is crossed in front of the other, until the ninth century. At the feet of Nataraja, you can see the statue of the saint. Behind is a room completely sealed, whose contents are unknown. You shouldn't have any difficulty in seeing all of this; at any rate, the sanctuary of Nataraja is open to all.

The temple's architecture is not unusual by any means, but at the entrance to the village you can see one of the most beautiful procession chariots (têr) of Tamil Nadu, which is in an open structure so that it is fully in sight. The yearly festival is Arudra, usually celebrated around the first of January. (This temple follows the same festival cycle as that of Chidambaram.)

The full hour by car on a small earthen road is well worth it. You can close your eyes and hear:

“You may call him the Heavenly.
You may call him the King of gods.
You may call him the Terrestrial.
The Wise with the effulgent throat
that was darkened in ancient times by the poison,
I, myself, call him
He-who-lives-in-my-heart.”
(From: Kârâvêlane, 1956, p 16)

F. Tiruttani

This ancient temple is one of the six “houses” of Muruga. As usual, it is situated on top of a hill, where the God has come to meditate. Well, if you want to meditate there, avoid festival days, during which the crowd is impressive! It is not far from Tiru Alangadu, and the view from the hill is beautiful. But this temple is not open to non-Hindus, and anyway, since it has been renovated in recent years, unless you really like Muruga, there is not much to see inside. Visit it in passing, for the view and the place, but if there is a queue or if you don't feel welcome, remain outside.

G. Tirukkalukkundram

This temple is very famous for the coming, at noon precisely, of two eagles who eat from the hand of a “priest”. A huge crowd comes to witness this, so it is best to arrive at eleven in the morning. Here, the ravages of tourism are more than obvious: you have to pay to even start climbing the hill, and the priests are very happy to let you enter the sanctum if you are willing to give them a lot of money....

The eagles are very impressive, and the crowd, which comes from all over India, is interesting in itself. (For whatever reason, Tirukkalukkundram must be very popular in Rajasthan, and you will see many colorful pilgrims from that part of India.) Bring a lunch bag with you (be careful of the monkeys who do not hesitate to share your food) and let the other tourists go. There are many things to see in this little town, and on the hill itself you will find several very ancient caves which show the antiquity of this site. Below, you can visit the large temple, the Vedagirishvara. So don't follow the stream of tourists, but explore further...

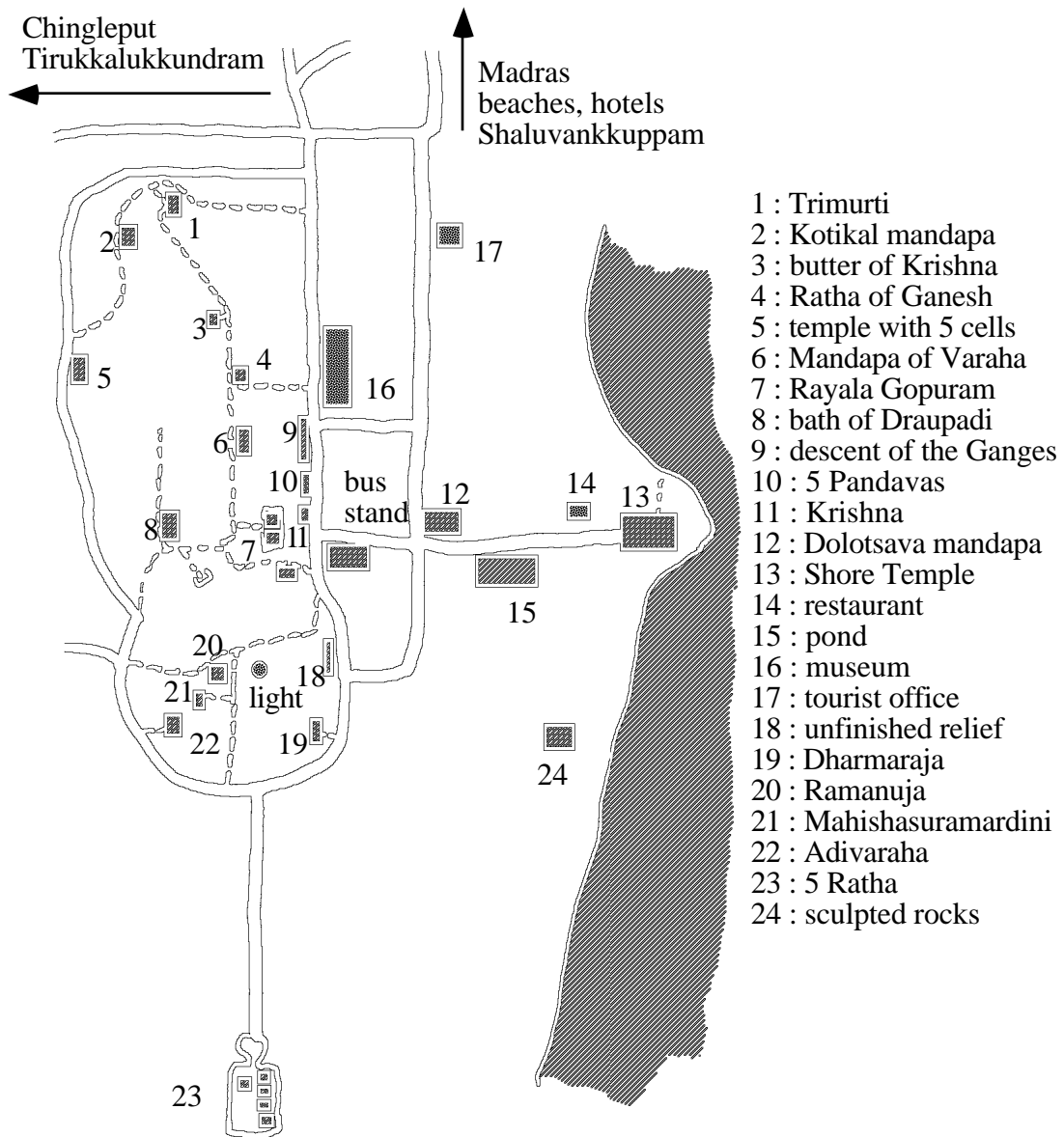
There are frequent busses between this town and Kanchi, sometimes with a quick change in Chingleput. There are also busses for Mahabalipuram, which is nearby.

H. Mahabalipuram

Tirukkalukkundram is full of Indian tourists, but Mahabalipuram is “the” town of Western tourists. I must admit, it is the most important site of Pallava architecture, who established their main port there and built extraordinary temples. But now there is no more worship in these temples (if there ever was any, most of them were never finished) and tourists can even touch the broken linga of the Shore Temple. After having seen Kalavai and Tiru Alangadu, admiring some of the most beautiful sculptures of India in between the sight of blue-jeans will seem surreal. This is the hippie India. I am sure that you understand that this preferred site of tourist guides is not my favourite.

Nevertheless, the “descent of the Ganges”, the Shore Temple and the “Ratha” demonstrate the creative genius of the Pallavas and deserve your visit. Built in the seventh century by a king called “Mamalla” (hence the Tamil name of the town: Mamallapuram), these monuments are considered to be the most ancient Tamil stone temples still standing and display a somehow anti-conformist architecture and the splendid sculpture of the Pallavas. At sunset, climb to the temple which is at the

top of the hill and dream... unfortunately, you won't be the only one. It is there that you will also find the workshops of the best stone sculptors, do not forget to pay them a visit.



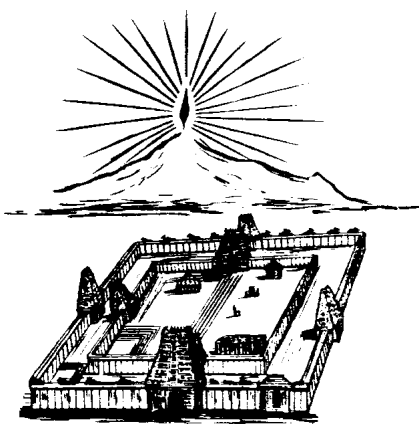
If you have a car, you can go to a hamlet five kilometers away, Shaluvankuppam. There you will find a marvellous cave-temple from the sixth century whose entrance looks like the open mouth of a tiger.

If you like "Club Med" hotels, spend the night in Mahabalipuram. You will find western food, and you will be able to wear a swimming suit. Busses to Madras and Kanchi (change at Chingleput) are very frequent.

I. Tiruvannamalai

In this town, you will find one of the most classical examples of the structure of a great South Indian temple. It has been fully studied by a research team from the “Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient”, so if you read French, you may learn everything you want about this impressive monument. Since so many scientists have entered the sanctuary, I don’t think anyone will object to your visit.

This site is linked with a very important legend: the hill behind the temple marks the place where Siva appeared as an infinite column of fire, which is the original linga for the Tamils.



One day Vishnu and Brahma were quarelling, trying to determine who was the greatest and most powerful. Of course, they kept on fighting, unable to agree. Siva appeared to them as a dazzling column of fire, which opened itself to reveal the Great God in an anthropomorphic form. He then asked Vishnu to become a boar and dig into the earth until he could find the root of the column. He asked Brahma to take the form of a swan and try to fly to the top of the column.

Vishnu dug for a very, very, very long time and finally understood that the column was infinite. He came back and bowed to Siva, acknowledging the God’s greatness. Brahma also flew for ages, unable to find the top, but he caught a flower falling from the linga. He came back and pretended he had taken the flower from the top of the column. Siva was not fooled and got angry at Brahma. He granted that Vishnu be worshipped as being a part of himself, whereas he forbade Brahma from ever again receiving adoration.

Behind every sanctuary of Siva, you will find a sculpture

representing this episode, the “lingodbhava”. You see Siva coming out of the linga and sometimes Vishnu as a boar digging downwards and Brahma as a swan flying upwards. This legend is known by everyone and will be given as the official explanation of what is a linga. Every year, for the Kartikkai dipam festival, an enormous fire is lit at the top of the hill, and it is so huge you can see it from quite far away, despite the crowds who gather to witness the re-enactment of this most popular legend.

The temple, which was built according to the rules (it is rarely so...), has a small sanctum holding the linga of the element “fire”. It is impressive to visit. Afterwards, if you like ashrams, you can visit the only real ashram of Tamil Nadu (that of Sri Aurobindo is more commercial than peaceful), that of Ramana Maharishi. You can even stay there a few days if they have room, for which they suggest you give a donation. It is great to meditate with those who live there permanently in a park full of peacocks (there are some unusual white peacocks). I really liked this interesting and peaceful experience, although it was somewhat more Western than Indian.

You can plan to visit Tiruvannamalai between Kanchi and Pondicherry, since direct and frequent busses link these towns. On the way to Pondi, you can stop at Gingee to see the fort. To stay in town, the ashram of Ramana Maharishi should be your first choice (people will take you there even if you don’t want to, because it’s “the” place where foreigners stay...). There is a hotel, but it’s not really great.

J. Tirupati

All the Tamils you will meet will ask you if you went to see this temple dedicated to Vishnu, which might have belonged originally to Muruga, and that some think is in fact half Siva, half Vishnu. The deity is purely Dravidian and it is hard to associate it with any Aryan god. It should be considered as different, the one and only Balaji, also named Venkateshvara. This god is extremely popular and competes with Muruga for the title of the favourite Dravidian deity. All this most probably hides a very interesting historical truth, but it will always remain a mystery, since it is impossible to do real scientific research in a temple for which people queue for several days just to get a glimpse of the god.

You have to pay, not to get inside, but simply to “jump” the queue! Needless to say, this temple is impressive for the sheer number of people who visit it, and the necessary organization. Devotees shave

their heads and sometimes roll themselves around the temple because they took vows: If there is such a crowd, it's not only because Balaji is one of the main deities that identify the Dravidians, but because every wish you make there comes true (you THEN have to come back and shave your head...).

This temple is extremely impressive for its riches, which it sometimes uses to renovate less fortunate temples, such as the Varadaraja Perumal in Kanchi. It receives a lot of donations, notably from famous people (actors, politicians, etc.), and the hair which is cut is not lost... it is sold. If you want to have a vision of the God-King in his most prosperous expression, this is it!

Numerous busses and even airplanes will take you from Madras to Tirupati, and you can take an organized tour, which unfortunately will not stop at Kalahasti. You can also go there from Kanchi, visiting Tiruttani and Tiru Alangadu on the way.

K. Kalahasti

If you want to take a break from the crowd of Tirupati, do not hesitate to visit the marvellous temple of Kalahasti. Also built on a hill, it coils like a snail, and it is favoured by sanyasin who want to meditate. The sanctuary, theoretically forbidden to non-Hindus, contains an amazing linga which was worshipped by an elephant, a spider and a snake, whose marks are visible. Here you find Siva as the "air" element, and, although the sanctum is well-enclosed, the flames in it are moved by mysterious winds.

This linga was worshipped by the saint Kannappa, whose story shows the great tolerance that Siva has towards his devotees. Kannappa was from a tribe of hunters and knew nothing of the proper rituals. To worship, he offered meat and water that he carried in his mouth, in other words, everything that was forbidden and polluting. The Brahmin priest who was attending the shrine complained to the God. Siva asked the Brahmin to hide himself and watch the devotee. When Kannappa began his own "wrong" rituals, the God appeared with one eye bleeding. Kannappa took his own eye and gave it to the God, whose second eye started bleeding... without hesitation the devotee offered his second eye. The Brahmin then understood how deep Kannappa's love was, and the pleased Siva gave back the eyes. This incident made Kannappa one of the sixty-three Saiva saints, and taught that it's not the way you pray which matters, but what you feel in your heart.

The sacred ashes (vibhuti) are sold here in the shape of a ball. The yearly festival is at Siva Ratri (in February-March), so avoid that time unless you LOVE crowds. Otherwise, it is one of the very rare temples where you won't be alone if you meditate (in the outermost prakara, contemplating the valley).

L. And more...

There is much more to see than what I wrote about here. Let me mention two places:

- Vedanthangal: a wildlife sanctuary preserving wetlands where you can see all sorts of birds, close to the town of Madhuranthagam. It's best to go between November and March, at sunset.

- Tiruvottiyur: a temple famous for having been a favourite place of one of the sixty-three Saiva saints, Sundarar, who would have been married at this place. The linga is an anthill. It is situated a few kilometers north of Madras.

7. Chola Nadu



A. Introduction

The Cauvery, the sacred river of South India, has its source in Karnataka (which now keeps most of its water, having built impressive dams for that purpose...) and flows in the center part of Tamil Nadu. After Trichy, the river bed spreads and becomes a fertile delta which was the land of the Chola dynasty. The number of important temples is impressive: there is one about every ten kilometers. If you have a car, you will be able to stop at all these places and fully benefit from your trip. If you take the bus, it's a little bit more complicated.

A1. An historical perspective

We have seen that the Cholas were a Tamil dynasty in Sangam times and that they were mentioned by Katyayana, a scholar of the fourth century B.C. They had already settled in the Cauvery delta and their port, Poompuhar (also named Korkai), is described in numerous ancient poems. At the end of the third century A.D., the Kalabhras invaded most of South India and reigned for three centuries over this land, causing the Cholas to disappear.

From the sixth century, the Pallavas became more and more powerful and made an alliance with the Pandyas to eliminate the Kalabhras, then they vied with each other for the control of the Tamil land. The country of the Cholas was caught between the two kingdoms and was very much fought over until the ninth century.

The Cholas reappeared suddenly and re-established their kingdom at the beginning of the ninth century. They developed the worship of Nataraja, who lost much of his wild side and got a cosmic dimension. The Cholas also contributed heavily to the codification of Hinduism by instituting the list of the sixty-three Saiva saints, the Nayanar, and the twelve Vaishnava saints, the Alvar. They sponsored the writing of the religious textbooks which are to this day the preferred references of the Tamils. They had a policy of conquest and expansion which took them very far: they invaded most of Southeast Asia where the remains of their culture are still to be found. After the time of the Sangam, this was a new golden age for the Tamils.

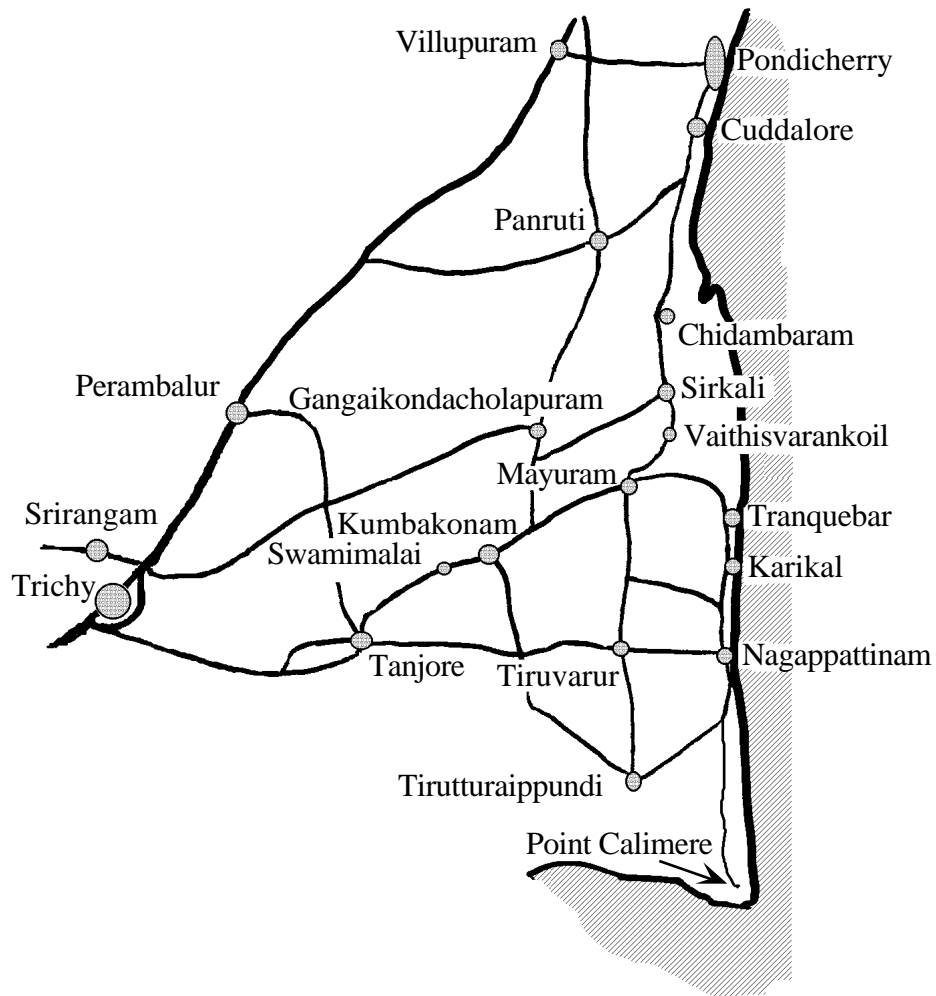
The golden age of the Cholas lasted until the beginning of the thirteenth century. The country was then invaded by the Pandyas and shortly afterwards by a Muslim dynasty, who were themselves quickly vanquished by the emperors of Vijayanagar towards the end of the fourteenth century. It remained part of the empire until the sixteenth century when Tanjore was conquered by a Nayakkar dynasty, who were at first vassals of Vijayanagar (just like what happened in Madurai). In the seventeenth century, descendants from the famous Mahratti king Shivaji defeated the Nayakkars and reigned from Tanjore.

This religiously important land has remained prosperous to this day, although the British had to fight the French who managed to keep the towns of Pondicherry and Karikal until Independence.

A2. Visiting

The easiest way to see this region is simply to go from one end to the other, starting either from Trichy, which can be reached by train or airplane, or from Pondicherry which is not very far from Madras by train or by express bus, and which is even closer to Tiruvannamalai. Pondicherry has several very good hotels and restaurants serving Chinese or Western food. It is a good place to rest and swim, and a good base for your exploration of the region, close to Chidambaram and Tiruvarur.

There are so many little towns and interesting temples that I will not describe them one by one in detail, but I will, rather, divide the region into three parts: the coastal region, from Pondicherry to Karikal; the middle part, between Mayuram and Tanjore; and finally the Trichy area. I advise you to base yourself in Pondicherry to visit the littoral, in Tanjore for its region and finally in Trichy. Hotels are not very good, except in these three cities.



If you plan to move around by bus, you are likely to miss many smaller, unknown temples which are, nevertheless, very interesting, and you will not be able to stop to watch people working in the fields, where they grow rice, bananas, cashew nuts, sugar cane, etc. Everywhere you go, remember to ask someone to tell you the place's legends. However, in Pondicherry, beware of young men "who want to be helpful" and who will tell you amazing "facts" about India. One day, I met some tourists to whom such unscrupulous people had told that every woman who was not wearing a silk sari was dying of hunger, because they would rather have silk saris than food. They felt awful throughout the rest of their journey, imagining that everybody was suffering in utter misery! This is not the only story that I have heard of this kind, and I suppose that these people took the opportunity to ask for some money. Remember, the more tourists, the more charlatans.

The dominant castes are the Vellalar (landowners) and the Chettiyar (merchants). The caste name is generally used as a “family name”. Brahmins are also numerous and very proud of their culture, which they will be more than happy to share with you. If you have enough time, try to meet a Brahmin and someone from another caste in each town: you will notice interesting differences between their perceptions.

B. Pondicherry

Pondicherry is a very special place. We are undoubtedly in the Tamil land, yet the French and the Bengali have left their indelible marks, giving to this seaside town a very pleasant character. The streets are lined with colonial houses and sidewalks. You can wear a swimming suit and behave like a hippy without being stared at. You will notice the French touch, with several “rues” and many French institutions. Pondicherry belonged to France until Independence, when it was freely given to India. During the end of the British Raj, it was used by Indian freedom fighters, such as Aurobindo, to escape the English. These political refugees were mostly from Bengal, and they added their culture to the Tamil-French culture of this strange little port. Pondicherrians had a rather good colonial experience and many chose to remain French. So, here is the place where you can experience colonialism without feeling bad!

Not counting a few small unimportant temples, there is nothing to visit, except the ashram of Sri Aurobindo, Auroville and the beach. Tours are organized by the ashram to see all this. Actually, you will soon get the impression that everything linked with tourism is organized by the ashram: hotels, souvenir shops, travel agencies, bookshops, petrol stations, and even cultural events. As I said earlier, if you want to experience what a real ashram is like, go to Tiruvannamalai. The beach is a great attraction: you can swim without being stared at, and, in the morning, you can watch the fishermen filling their nets with fish without going far from the shore.

I recommend Pondicherry for its French fries (indeed...), for having fun, and taking a good rest between the Tondaimandalam and the Chola Nadu. The “International Guest House” of the ashram is clean, cool and inexpensive. If you prefer luxury, yet that is still within very reasonable means, try the “Park Guest House” which is on the beach: the rooms are great, with large terraces facing the sea. You can eat across the street on top of the Ajanta Hotel.



- 1: French Consulate
- 2: (Ashram) International Guest House
- 3: (Ashram) Park Guest House
- 4: Sri Aurobindo Ashram
- 5: Botanical Garden
- 6: Railway Station
- 7: Mahatma Gandhi Memorial
- 8: Public Garden
- 9: Nehru Street (bazaar)

10: Lal Bahadur street

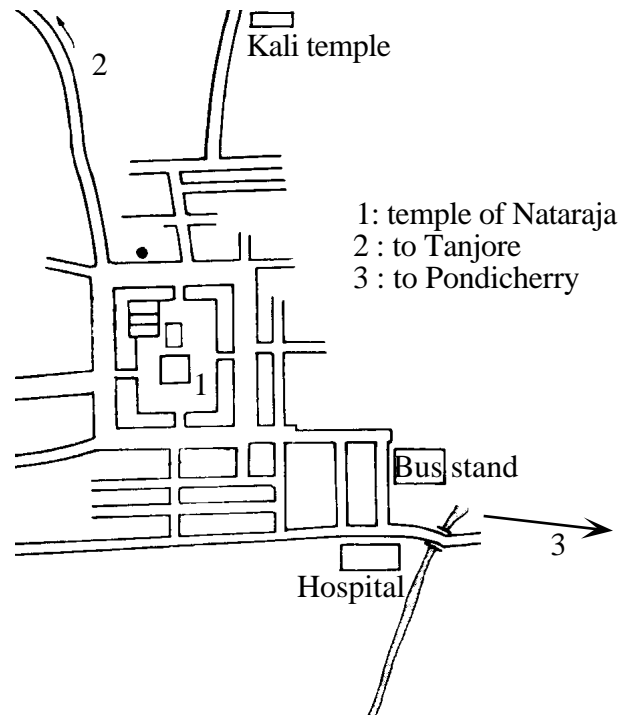
11: Bus stand, to all other cities

12: Bharati's house (Subramaniam Bharati -1882-1921 - is a very famous Tamil poet, who, as did Sri Aurobindo, took refuge in Pondicherry towards the end of the British Empire. He fought for India's Independence and for an egalitarian society. His political ideas are still a great inspiration for Tamil politicians.)

13: Auroville Information Center

14: General Post Office

C. Chidambaram



It is in this town that you will find the most famous temple dedicated to Nataraja. Three thousand Brahmins are said to have witnessed the dance challenge between Siva and Kali. Once it was over, they asked the God to stay there, dancing for eternity. Since Siva had appeared as being made of fire (and not of flesh), he “crystallized” and became a ruby which has his well-known shape, one leg crossed in front of the other. This ruby can be seen every day in the morning, around ten-thirty. It is presented facing east (unlike all other statues of Nataraja which always face south) in the main sanctum of his temple. Just before it is shown, the priests make a puja to a crystal linga which symbolizes the element of “space” (ether- akasha).

This temple, which is undoubtedly the most famous in Tamil Nadu, can be easily visited. Non-hindus can enter everywhere except in the sanctum, which is widely opened so that you can easily see the rituals done to the bronze Nataraja (facing south), the crystal linga and the ruby. It is the only temple where women dance as part of the worship during the festivals. With some luck, you might even be allowed in the sanctum to see the “secret” of Chidambaram: an arch decorated with leaves and a trident of gold in front of... NOTHING; Siva is also the Void.



The roof which covers the sanctum is made of pure gold tiles. It has never been cleaned or repaired for more than a thousand years! You will notice that it's really different from the gold-plated roof next to it. (To the best of my knowledge, there has never been a theft.)

In the outer prakara, you can admire a superb pond in which there is a linga which is only visible when the water is low (in the northwest corner). Dance performances are sometimes organized in a one-thousand-pillar mandapa which lies northeast of the sanctuaries. This is where the tradition of Bharata natyam is preserved and where the poet Sekkilar sang the stories of the sixty-three Nayanar for the first time.

All the Brahmins of the town belong to a special caste, the Dikshitar, and are supposed to be the descendants from those who saw the dance of Nataraja. Their wives are not allowed to leave town and they never marry outside their group. They tie their hair on one side and the women drape their saris in a special way. With some luck, you will see some with red hair. Ancient Tamil texts describe many people as having hair “with the color of copper” (Karaikkalammaiyar and Sundarar among others). Even today, you will find red-haired Tamils, mostly in faraway villages.

In the town, you can still see the Kali temple which is northeast of the Nataraja temple. It is much smaller but very ancient, with a very different atmosphere, similar to that of Tiru Alangadu. Just as you

arrive in the town, notice the buildings of the famous Annamalai University, close to the “Tourist Bungalow” and a few other hotels of poor quality.

D. The Littoral

From Chidambaram to Karikal, the countryside is not only very beautiful, but also sprinkled with temples associated with the lives of saints and the golden age of the Cholas. Here are the most important:

- Vaithishvarankoil. It means literally the town of the temple (koil) of Siva (Ishvaran) as a physician (vaithaya). If you are sick, you can always try! The linga faces west, and in front of it stretches a spacious hall where devotees flock to obtain some vibhuti which is said to have healing powers. The tree under which was the original shrine is also worshipped. Numerous legends are linked with this temple, where Muruga and Rama are supposed to have worshipped.

- Sirkali. The saint Tirujnanasambandar lived here when he was a child. One day when his mother had left him in the temple, he felt hungry. The Goddess appeared and fed him with her own milk: divine wisdom. The temple is dedicated to “Sattanatar”, Siva who vanquished Vishnu and wears his skin as a cloth.

- Gangaikondacholapuram. Close to Mayuram, this temple was built by Kulottunga I to celebrate his conquest of all land up to the Ganges. It is famous for its architecture.

- Karikal. Not much to see. It belonged to the French. It is where Karaikkalammaiyar was born some 1500 years ago; you will find a sanctuary to her memory. In the nearby city of Tirunallar, you can visit an unusual temple dedicated to Saturn (next to Siva). North of Karikal, you will find Tranquebar, an old Dutch colony with a seventeenth century castle turned into an hotel.

- Driving to the south, you will find Velanganni, a church where the Virgin Mary became an emanation of the Goddess and which is crowded by Hindus. Further south, there is a wildlife sanctuary famous for its herons, flamingoes and deers, Point Calimere.

Except in Chidambaram, Western tourists are not frequent. You won't find good hotels, just small Indian “lodges”. It is why I advise you to visit these places during the day and stay at night in Pondicherry or Kumbakonam.

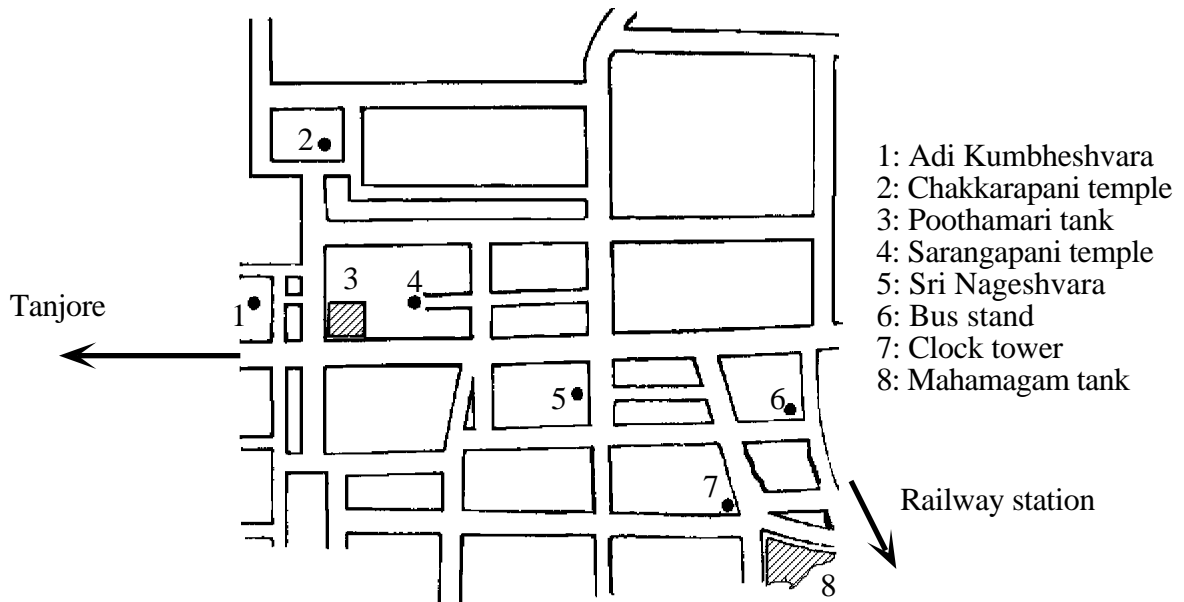
E. The Tanjore region

Actually, it is around Kumbakonam that you will find most temples, but since Tanjore was the capital of the Chola Nadu, it gave its name to the region. Frequent busses link all the towns, and you have good hotels in Kumbakonam and Tanjore.

E1. Kumbakonam

This town is full of temples! It is the “Kanchi” of the Cholas. The most important are:

- Sri Sarangapani, dedicated to Vishnu, has two entrances: one to the south (used from the 16th of July to the 13th of January, when the sun goes to the south) and one to the north (used from the 14th of January to the 15th of July, when the sun goes to the north).



- Adi Kumbheshvara, the temple which gives its name to the town. It means “the Lord (ishvara) from the original (adi) pot (kumbha)”. The pot contained the germ of Creation and the Ambrosia (amrita) which spilled over into the ponds of this temple. The “kumbha mela” (the festival of the pot) is celebrated every twelve years. This festival links several places all over India.

- Mahamagam Tank is the pond (tirtta) used during the Kumbha mela, when this “bath” becomes the most sacred of India.

- Sri Nageshvara is a temple dedicated to the “Lord of Cobras” (naga), and it is said that the snake who holds Vishnu on the Milk Ocean (Adisesha) comes there to worship Siva, as well as the sun, Surya.

- Sri Ramaswami, dedicated to Rama, is decorated with superb frescoes and sculptures.

This town is famous for its sculptors who make bronze statues. If you look hard in the bazaars, you will find beautiful pieces that are much cheaper than in Madras. Kumbakonam is not well-known for tourism, but since it is a prosperous city, it has many new hotels in its center.

E2. Around Kumbakonam

Within a few kilometers from Kumbakonam, there are an impressive number of famous temples:

- Tiruvarur. This temple is associated with the saint Sundarar and the great musician Thyagaraja, and it has been famous since the times of the Cholas. Music and dance were performed daily within the walls of the sanctuaries, since this was one of the greatest cultural centers of the region during the Medieval period. Today, it is a huge field of ruins around mysterious sanctums. One contains a tiny linga which is kept in a box in between puja. The town is rarely found on maps and tourists are unknown there. But if you want to experience the feeling of discovering the mysterious remains of a past civilization, try it.

- Swamimalai is built on an artificial hill. The temple is dedicated to Muruga as representing the mantra “OM” (in Sanscrit: “AUM”. In Tamil, it is written differently and looks like an embryo). It is very famous and interesting from an historical perspective:



Here Muruga is Siva’s master, to whom he teaches the mantra. In front of the sanctuary, the God’s mount is an elephant rather than a peacock, which clearly shows that here, Muruga is the supreme king.

- Tiruvalamjuli is dedicated to Vinayagar, who is white because he came from the Milk Ocean’s foam. This temple has no shrine of the nine planets and is remarkable for its sculptures.

- Suryanarkoil. Is it the lost shrine of the nine planets missing in Tiruvalamjuli? This temple, which has unfortunately been considerably rebuilt in recent years, is dedicated solely to the nine planets. It is supposed to have healing powers, especially for leprosy (don't worry, there aren't many lepers, and they are not frightening - you might not even notice they are lepers at all, thanks to modern medicine...). The temple is far away in the countryside, so it is not very easy to find (on the way, you will see many pretty little villages).

- Tribhuvanam was built by King Tribhuvana to celebrate a victory. Legend says that it was created to demonstrate the construction principles extolled by the poet Sekkilar.

E3. Tanjore

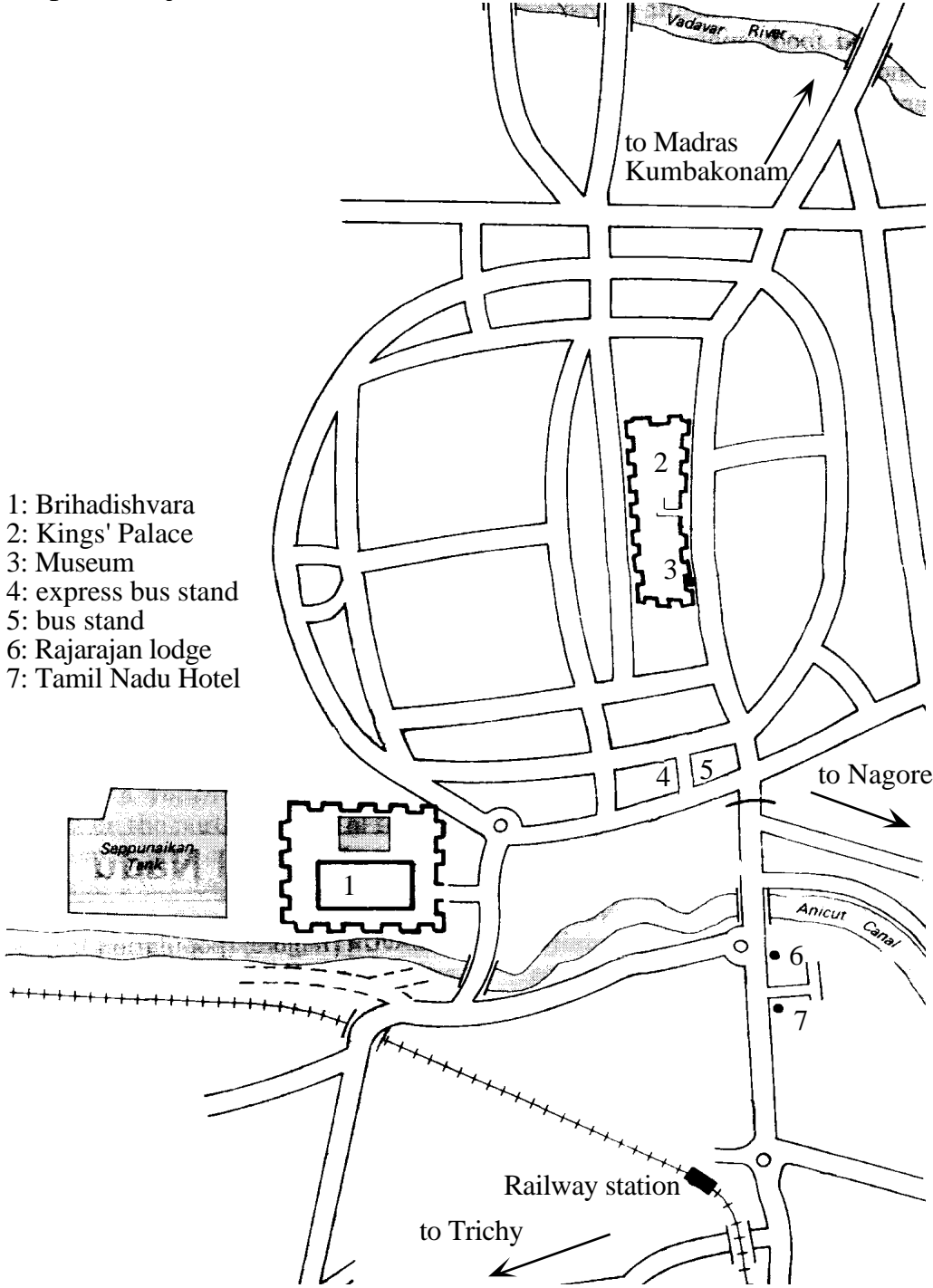
Called "Tanjavur" in Tamil, this city used to be the Chola capital from the time of the famous king Raja Raja I in the tenth century. It remained the capital under the Nayakkar and the Mahratti kings. There are several temples in this city, but only one is famous, the Brihadishvara, which is situated in a fort of the same period. It took twelve years for Raja Raja I to achieve the construction of this extraordinary temple surrounded by a vast prakara and equally gigantically proportioned pavillions. The vimana which rises above the sanctum is over 66 meters high (217 feet), and the monolithic dome which tops it weighs about 80 tons; it was hoisted there from a ramp the bottom of which was 6 kilometres away (4 miles).

The vast proportions of the temple and the huge size of the monolithic Nandi and linga evoke the golden age of the Cholas and the greatness of Raja Raja I, whose birthday is still celebrated every year in the month of October-November (Aippaci). This monument should be on everyone's mind between the Taj Mahal and the pyramids of Egypt, but because it is lost at the edge of the world, you will be able to appreciate the peace that this temple imposes without having to share it with a crowd of tourists. Do not fail to visit it.

In town, you will also find a palace which contains a museum with, of course, bronze statues. The "sangeetha mahal" is a concert hall built by the Mahratti kings. These buildings are relatively recent and are only a paltry effort on the part of the Nayakkar and the Mahratti kings to try to equal the Chola's greatness.

You will find most hotels close to the railway station, such as the "Tourist Bungalow". There are also some across the canal, closer to the bus stand and the temple.

Map of Tanjore:



F. Trichy

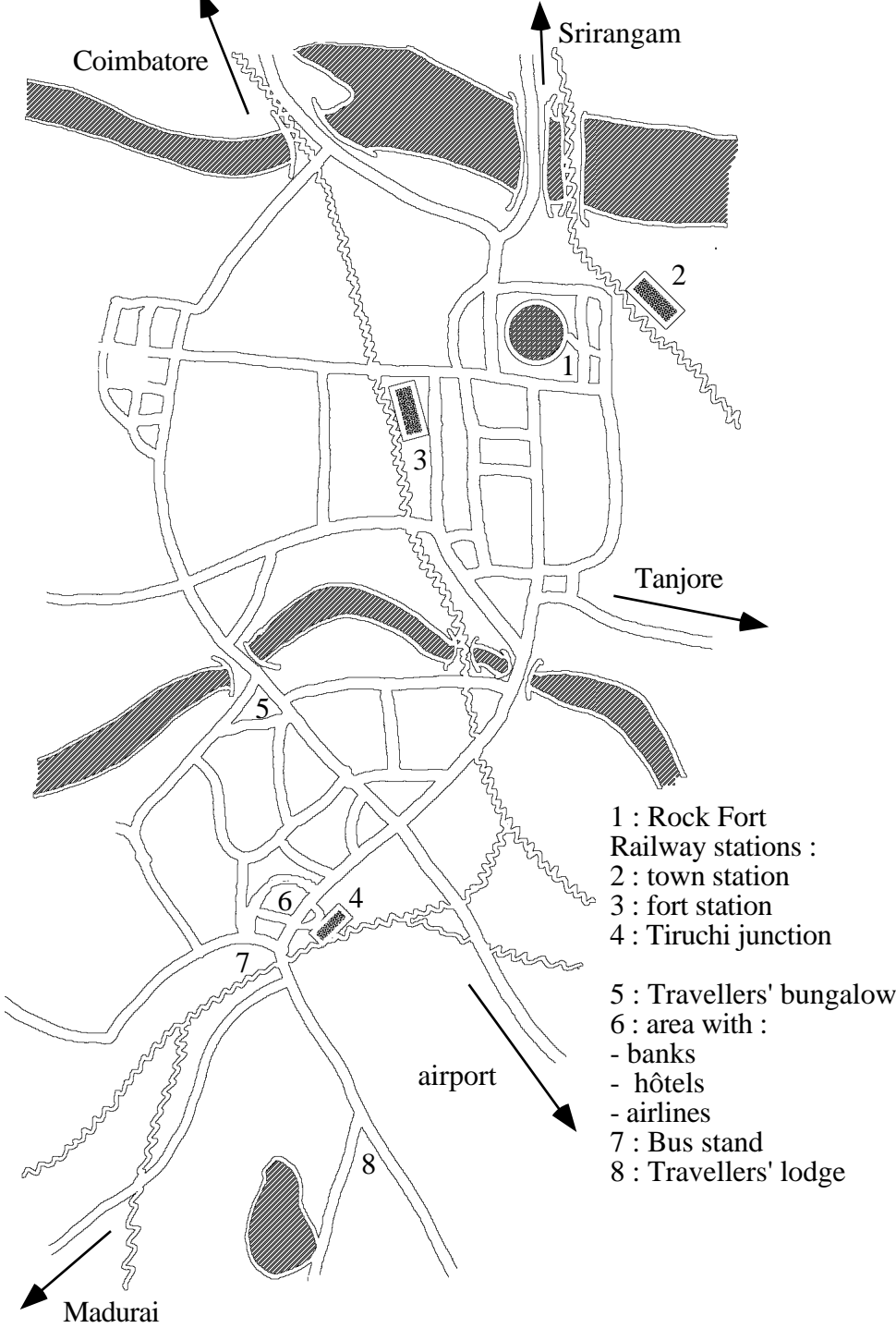
Called in Tamil “Tiruccirapalli”, this city has famous and ancient temples, but what you will mostly notice is that it is a big modern capital, known for its industries and its technical university. It is dominated by a huge rocky hill on top of which there is a temple dedicated to Vinayakar (Rock Fort). Halfway, you will find another shrine to Siva transformed into a mother who came to help a young woman who was giving birth (Tayumanavar). The hill is fortified. You can go to the top of the hill, but the temples are theoretically closed to non-Hindus. The view from the top is great, with the largest temple of India on the horizon.

Situated on the island of Srirangam in the middle of the Cauvery, Sri Ranganata is a temple dedicated to Vishnu. The legend says that it was Rama who installed the icon, which is now in the middle of a maze covering almost a square kilometer (7 500 000 square feet - the dimensions of the outermost prakara are 936m x 768m or 3000 feet by 2500 feet). Seven prakara enclose what seems like an entire town and an incredible number of mandapa. Non-Hindus can go up to the third prakara, which leaves four of them to visit. The yearly festival is usually held in December (Vaikunta ekadasi).

Nearby, you will find a temple dedicated to Siva, Tiruvanaikkavu or Jambukeshvara, whose linga symbolizes the “water” element. It was worshipped by a spider and an elephant. During the noon puja, the priest dresses as a woman to show that it is the Goddess herself who pays homage to her Lord. It is a beautifully sculptured temple from the Chola period.

In Trichy, the bus stand and the railway station are close to each other, as well as to the airline companies and the main hotels. From there you will find many busses to Srirangam or the Rock Fort. Please note that on municipal busses, women are seated in priority: as they come in, the conductor asks men to give them their seats.... appreciate it during rush hour!

Map of Trichy:



8. Around...



I described in the previous chapters the Tondaimandalam and the Chola Nadu, and both have an endless architectural and religious wealth. But there are in the Dravidian land many more places equally interesting. Without going into details, I will give you some advice and directions to help you explore further and further...

A. The South

A1. Madurai

I always wondered why tourist guides barely mention Kanci and rarely Kumbakonam, but give a great deal of importance to Madurai, the ancient capital of the Pandya kingdom. Of course, you may dream about this city known to Megasthenes, whose origins go back to untold antiquity... Alas, very little remains from those glorious times. You must keep in mind that it was occupied for quite a while by a Sultan who destroyed much of it.

In this city you will find numerous hotels and restaurants with all types of cuisine. You will join the huge crowd visiting the vast temple of Minakshi, most of which was rebuilt in the seventeenth century. The most ancient part is, of course, the sanctuary, which is theoretically closed to non-Hindus. Do not miss the interesting museum in the one-thousand-pillar mandapa. You are allowed to take pictures during the siesta.

You can easily find tours by bus or taxi to see all the tourists' favourites in one long morning:

- the Minakshi temple
- the "pudu mandapam" market
- the palace of Tirumala Nayakkar and its "museum"
- Alagar koil (a temple dedicated to Vishnu)
- Tirupparankundram (a temple dedicated to Muruga, which is a very ancient and most interesting cave.)

If you are hiring a taxi, ask to be taken to Pandi Koil. This place is dedicated to a warrior-god (Pandi) and is famous for witchcraft and possessions. An American anthropologist was possessed there. The witches do have powers, but don't worry, they only use them for good purposes.

You can also visit the wildlife sanctuary of Muddanthurai, hoping to see a tiger, a Macaco monkey or a cobra. Most tourists continue their journey towards the mountain, see below...

A2. Rameshvaram and the Ramnad

The temple of Rameshvaram is one of India's most sacred, and pilgrims flock there to see the place where Rama worshipped Siva so that the Great God would help him to bring back his wife who had been kidnapped by the king of Sri Lanka (problems between India and Sri Lanka are not recent...). Unless you are especially attracted to Rama, the long journey leading to this faraway place is not really worth it. Non-hindus cannot go farther than the enormous halls of the outermost prakara. It is a beautiful, vast temple, but exactly unique...

Nevertheless, if you choose to go there, take time to visit the Ramnad region, where you will meet people from the very ancient warrior tribes of India. Their women still wear enormous earrings on elongated earlobes. You may have the opportunity to see many customs which have been forgotten by the more "urbane" Tamils. If you like ethnographic exploration, you have the choice between this region and the Tirunelveli.

A3. The south of the South, Kanniyakumari

From Madurai, you can travel across another very interesting region, the Tirunelveli, on your way to Kanniyakumari. The village

people are somewhat proud and “wild”, but if you have time and patience, you will be able to see their fascinating folklore which is still well-preserved. Since at the end of your journey you will find one of the rarest monuments in India, and the place where Gandhi’s ashes were thrown into the sea, it is well worth the trip.



The southern tip of India is a most sacred place, and pilgrims coming from North India are especially numerous. They come there to bathe where the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean meet, and where the land ends. Many Bengalis make this long journey just to see the rock where Swami Vivekananda got the inspiration for his expedition to the Western world (now there is a beautiful modern mandapa on top of it). People also visit the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi, whose ashes were thrown into the sea at this place. What attracts Tamils to this place is the temple to the Goddess Kanniyakumari, the “virgin” whom Siva refused to marry. Because she was forced to remain celibate, she performed many austerities and acquired enormous power. All those who see her can never forget her.

Not very far from there, the temple of Suchindram is famous for its musical pillars and its giant statue of Hanumant. A little further, you reach Nagercoil which is dedicated to the cobras (Naga). In the temple, milk is offered to the snakes, and you can receive some of the sand in which they are supposed to live.

After Nagercoil, going towards Kerala, you will find a monument lost in the forest, which by itself is worth the journey to the far south. Remember that when Chellappa Saluva Nayakkar lost his battle against the Vijayanagar emperor Achyutaraya, he fled to a small kingdom hidden at the land's end (literally), the Travancore. He lived there for ten years in a palace which is still standing (see p 22).

The palaces of Madurai and Tanjore date back, at the earliest, to the sixteenth century. Nothing remains of the abodes of the Cholas or the Pandyas, which were destroyed by the conquerors of their kingdoms. Happily, the Travancore was still unconquered in 1947 when the Maharaja was convinced to give his land to the newly created India. So, the kings preserved their palace, a most beautiful building of lacquered wood, the "Padmanabhapuram Palace" (do not mistake it for the temple dedicated to Vishnu which has the same name, and is situated in Trivandrum, in Kerala). The wooden structures were constantly rebuilt, so they only date back to the seventeenth century, but the ground floor which is made of stone is much older, at least from the thirteenth century.

B. The west

B1. The Tamil mountains

From Kodaikkanal to Ooty and the Mysore plateau, you will find many small towns famous for their cool climates (the English liked that!) and the beauty of their scenery. Waterfalls, tea, coffee and cardamom plantations give to this region a romantic atmosphere, enhanced by many colonial buildings. Numerous wildlife sanctuaries let you see, if you are lucky, all sorts of animals, such as tigers, bears, panthers, monkeys (you can see those everywhere, even in cities!) and mongooses. Everywhere you will find good hotels and organized tours, in other words, everything a tourist might desire.

Obviously, the most interesting is well-hidden. In the mountains live isolated tribes which are very interesting historically and ethnographically. For example, the Toda tribesmen have kept the ritual names of the gods in ancient Sumerian in their prayers. Most of these people are too far away, staying in villages to which there are often no roads, so that it is impossible to visit them unless you decide to spend a long time there.

You will find in these mountains many temples dedicated to the Goddess, especially Mariyamman and, of course, to Muruga. Here is a short, non-exhaustive list of what you can visit:

- Kodaikkanal. You can take an organized tour from Madurai. Situated at an altitude of 2125 meters (7000 feet), it has a beautiful lake, with waterfalls and plantations along the way.

- Palni. One of the most sacred temples dedicated to Muruga. The icon is made of a substance similar to wax, and everything which touches it (the various liquids with which it is bathed) takes on a healing power. During the festivals related to Muruga (there are several throughout the year), you will be able to see many devotees doing mortifications.

- Ootacamund (Ooty). The highest hill resort of South India, it is the “queen of the Blue Hills” (Nilgiris). If you go through Coimbatore to reach it, stop to buy some of the finest jewels of Tamil Nadu. Nearby, you will find a wildlife sanctuary with bisons. It is a beautiful place with splendid scenery, but of lesser cultural interest, unless you like the colonial period.

- Mudumalai. It is the most famous wildlife sanctuary in the region. You can visit the jungle seated on an elephant (who hasn't dreamt of that?).

B2. Kerala

This Indian state is extremely beautiful. High mountains abruptly give way to lagoons, hidden under luxuriant vegetation. Traditions from all of the South's times have been preserved, conferring to this place a very special appeal. Strong Christian and Islamic influences did not destroy the most ancient customs, such as the “Onam” festival which is celebrated in August-September.

Trivandrum is not very interesting; there are a small colonial museum and a big temple which is totally impossible to enter (even in the outermost prakara...). Nearby, you will find a beach resort well-known among tourists: Kovalam. If you want to rest and swim, here is the place. The best is the journey by boat on the lagoon between Kottayam and Cochin. If you stop at Allepey, you can climb up to the wildlife sanctuary of Thekkady, famous for its tigers (you will be really lucky if you see one!).

In Cochin, go to a performance of Kathakali, a dance done only by men who wear pounds and pounds of extraordinary clothing and make-up. They even put small balls in their eyes so that they become red...

Thus, you will be able to see in the flesh those terrifying deities that the myths tell you about. (You will find reproductions of these “masks-make up” for sale everywhere.) Try to watch how the dancers prepare themselves; it is quite impressive.

Outside the usual tourist places, you can visit Guruvayur, dedicated to Krishna, and Sabarimalai, dedicated to Ayappa, Kerala’s favourite God. But keep in mind that in Kerala, temples are VERY STRICTLY forbidden to non-Hindus, and that if you want to enter, first be sure inside yourself that you are Hindu (then Siva will help you...).

C. The North

To the north of Tamil Nadu is the state of Andhra Pradesh, whose most interesting part belongs to the Tondaimandalam. I described it in that chapter. To the northwest, the state of Karnataka has a lot to offer to tourists.

Bangalore is a prosperous city, the technological capital of India, its “Silicon Valley”. There are plants to build supersonic planes and to launch rockets, and there is a dairy company which is run entirely by computers. It is also where computer software is created that is exported all over the world. If you are a tourist, you will have to pass through it, but unless you are interested in modern India, you won’t find it very interesting.

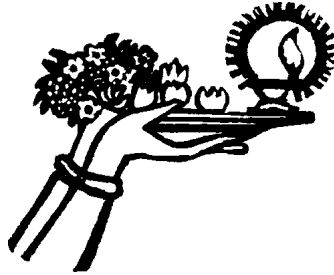
Mysore is famous for the palace of its Maharaja, whose bedroom walls are made of solid silver. It is nineteenth-century India at its craziest. There is also a nice zoo and, not far, another wildlife sanctuary, Bandipur. Under a modern dam there is a vast garden, Vrindavan. All this is very beautiful, but the most interesting is the temple of Goddess Chamundi standing on a hill, with the largest monolithic Nandi of India on the road.

The usual tourist circuit includes: Belur, Halebid and Sravanabelagola, which are two Hindu temples and one Jain, all decorated with beautiful sculptures. Since there are more tourists than devotees, you will have no problem getting inside. If you went as far as Bangalore, it would be a pity to miss these sites, which can be all visited in a day through an organized tour.

For the really courageous, the ruins of Vijayanagar, the “city of Victory” are in Hampi. It is far from everything, like so many other interesting ancient temples of Karnataka, but it spreads over several square kilometers (several square miles)! The old capital of the Chalukyas is Badami, and it is famous for its ancient (but abandoned) sanctuaries. Aihole and Pattadakal are also worth visiting.

If you are interested in ethnography, see Mercara, just north of the Kerala border, which is the capital of the Coorg tribe. These people have their own very particular traditions.

9. Conclusion



There is much to see and to learn in the south of India. For those who take the time, it is an endless source of discoveries that lead very far into human history.

Numerous are those who, through contact with these people and these rituals, drinking at the source of the Vital Energy worshipped everywhere, came back more rooted in themselves, and with a better understanding of the world.

Everytime I go to Kanchipuram, I feel that I am rediscovering myself, not that I become Tamil, but on the contrary, because it is how my friends love me and want me: as myself, different, unique, and as an expression of the Goddess, as is every woman. It took me a long time to understand and to assimilate the essence of this culture which fascinates me. The apparent contradictions became meaningful, and by overlooking what my prejudices had taught me, I was able to see what was obvious to them, this over-flowing they love to express in the pongal ritual.

I hope that through this book you will be able to understand this country a little bit better. At least, it is what I wish. I would be very happy to receive your comments and your discoveries.

I have some advice on which I shall insist: let the Tamils be who they are, without judging them. Do not accustom the children to beg from tourists. Behave in such a way that they will remember you kindly. Make friends who will remain so for the rest of your life. And finally, do not hesitate to explore!

May Siva smile at you in his dance.

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11. VOCABULARY

The Tamil words are given as follows:

- as they are written in Tamil
- as they should be pronounced
- translation.

- வணக்கம் - nnakkam - welcome, mark of respect
வாங்கள் - ngga - come, come in
போய் விட்டு வருகிறேன் - y-tu-varênn - goodbye
ஊர் - - village, town, country
உங்கள் ஊர் என்ன? - ggal ur iénna? - where do you come from?
என் ஊர்... - n ur... - my country of origin (is)....
கோயில் - -il - temple
சாப்பாடு - ppâdu - meal, food
சைவச்சாப்பாடு - a-ee-va sâppâdu - vegetarian meal
சாப்பிடுங்கள் - ppidungga - please eat
குடிங்கள் - dingga - please drink
காரம் - ram - very spicy
வேண்டும் - nnûme - I want
வேண்டாம் - ndâme - I don't want
தேங்காய் - ngga-y - coconut
தேங்காய் நீர் - êngga-y-nîr - coconut water
தண்ணீர் - nnîr - water
இட்லி - dli - cake made of rice and bean flours
வடை - dai-y - fritter
பூரி - ri - fried bread
உப்புமா - ppuma - dish made of coarse flour
மசாலா - ssâlâ - curry, spice mixture
தோசை - sa-y - pancake
சாம்பார் - mbâr - vegetable and beans dish
தயிர் - yir - yoghurt
போதும் - dum - it's enough
பேர் - r - name
உங்கள் பேர் என்ன? - ngga pêr iénna? - what is your name?
என் பேர்... - én pêr ... - my name (is)

நான் - n - I
 நீங்கள் - ngga(l) - you
 எங்கே - nggé - where
 இங்கே - ggué - here
 அங்கே - ggué - there
 தமிழ் தெரியுமா? - milj tériyumâ? - Do you know Tamil?
 தமிழ் தெரியாது -
 போகலாமா? -
 போகலாம் - galâm - let's go
 வரலாமா? - °\$tcome in?
 வரட்டுமா? - rattumâ? - May I take leave?
 ஆமா - â - yes
 இல்லை - -la-y - no
 சௌக்கியமா? - ôkkiyamâ? - How are you?
 சௌக்கியம் - ôkkiyam - I'm fine
 வீட்டுக்குப் போங்கள் -
 பிடிக்குமா? -
 பிடிக்கும் - ˆI175ÿ'I àf
 பிடிக்காது -
 நன்றி - ndri - thanks
 தமிழ் நாடு ரொம்ப பிடிக்கும் -

Name of towns in Tamil (it may help you identify busses):

சென்னை -
 காஞ்சிபுரம் - Kanchipuram
 வேல்புரம் - Vellore
 கலவை - Kalavai
 திருவாலங்காடு -
 திருத்தணி -
 திருக்கழுக்குன்றம் -
 மாமல்லபுரம் -
 திருவண்ணாமலை -
 திருப்பதி -
 பாண்டிச்சேரி -
 சிதம்பரம் -
 மாயூரம் - Mayuram
 காரைக்கால் - Karikal

கும்பகோணம் - mbakonam
தஞ்சாவூர் - njore
திருச்சி - ichy
மதுரை - durai
கன்னியாகுமரி - anniyakumari



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