

TEMPLES OF SOUTH INDIA

by

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Untouched by the architectural concepts of the West, unmoved by Islamic influence, relatively undisturbed by the various invasions which the rest of India was periodically subject to, the temples of South India are some of the purest examples of Hindu and Dravidian art existing today. These buildings are no monarch's appeasement of his own vanity. Nor are they memorials to the dead. Nor again are they a more commemoration of one particular event. Rather are they testaments to Man's timeless faith in something or someone beyond himself. In fact these massive structures surging upwards and encompassing all the manifold aspects of Hindu religion and mythology are symbols of humanity's eternal reaching out to the sublime, the divine, the infinite. And whereas most well-known architectural monuments are things of the past, wrapped in the silence of the dead, these temples today are still teeming with life and with a vitality all their own.

The heyday of the South Indian temples lasted from the 7th to the 17th century, a.d.—from the reign of the Pallavas to the Vijayanagar and Nayyak dynasties. However, from references to them in the Puranas such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, in the early Dravidian annals and in the works of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalee and Canarese poets and scholars, the origin of this temple art dates back many hundreds of years before that, even to pre-Aryan times. Such a reference in a very early Dravidian work is made to the temple of Kanya Kumari at the extreme southern tip of India where the three oceans meet. According to this legend this is the spot where Parvathi awaited the arrival of her celestial bridegroom Siva who, to her consternation, was unduly late in coming! Often a temple is built on the site of a particularly sacred or auspicious event. Such is the temple of Rameswaram on the south-east coast of India, where Rama is supposed to have set foot on his triumphant return from

Lanka after the defeat of Ravana, known as Thosakan in Thailand. Or the temple of Thiruvannamalai on the hill of which Siva once appeared in the form of a great tongue of fire. Frequently a temple was erected by a ruler in gratitude for some favour granted. The splendid Rajarajeswara temple in Tanjore was built by King Rajaraja of the Chola dynasty in the 10th century in commemoration of his victories over the Chalukyas, Pandyas and the kings of Ceylon. Such also is the Siva Nateswara temple in Chidambaram built by the leper-king Svetavarna (the 'white one') on being cured of his leprosy. In some cases the clue to the origin of a temple is found in the records kept in the temples themselves. But when it is written—as it is in the Sri Padmanabha or reclining Vishnu temple in Trivandrum—that the temple was founded “on the ninety-fifth day of Kali yuga” (or the final era in the Hindu conception of time without known beginning or end) then we are non-plussed. One can only presume in such cases that a certain 'vigraha' or devine image was discovered, that it possessed, acquired, or was invested with a profound sanctity, that a shrine was built over it and that this shrine mushroomed into a great temple according to the reputation of this image, the faith of its devotees and the power of its patrons.

For undoubtedly the temples of South India, as of much of Indian art, were blessed with royal patronage. Among the earliest of these royal patrons were the Pallavas—600-750 a.d. who held sway over the Eastern Decean while the Chalukyas ruled over Western Decean. The best-known work of Pallava art is the seven pagodas of Mammalapuram near Madras built by the rulers Mahendravarman and Narasimhavarman. These are named after the five Pandavas—the heroes of the Mahabharata—and are dedicated to different deities. Though this art is similar to the more northern art of Sanchi and Amaravati still one sees here the beginnings of the gopuram—or elaborate doorways—and the decorative wall-friezes that were so vital a part of later South India art. These features developed under the Chalukyas and the Cholas whose empire extended along the east coast up to Burma, King Rajendra Chola defeating the Burmese Kingdom of Pegu. Their art is still austere and stately as is seen

in the magnificent Rajarajeshwara temple in Tanjore and some of the Kanchipuram monuments. The Pandyas in the 11th century established their capital at Madura which soon became the centre of south Indian architecture. However most of the Pandyan monuments, like many of those of the pre-seventh century period, were destroyed by Muslim invaders. Under the Vijayanagar kings—1500-1650—temple art reached its height, especially under the illustrious kings Krishnadevaraya and Achutaraya. While being increasingly ornate it was at the same time elegant and courtly. The ornamentation and ornateness reached its extreme under the Nayyak dynasty of Madura, whose presiding deity was Siva for Sivaism was gaining in the South whereas that of the Vijayanagar kings had been Vishnu. The most striking example of Nayyak art is the Meenakshi temple in Madura built by Tirumala Nayyak who held sway over all South India in the seventeenth century, and was the last of the great Hindu kings. This massive temple with its nine towering gopurams, its immense pillared mandapams or halls and pavilions, its corridor within corridor (one of which is entirely lined with Siva Lingams from the most sacred sites of the country) and its elaborate and intricate carving is truly an amazing piece of architecture. The sculpture here is profuse and varied, ranging from mediocre to superb. There is one exquisite piece of work depicting Vishnu giving Uma or Parvathi in marriage to Siva. The tender gravity on the face of the bridegroom, the benign expression of Vishnu and the tremulous rapture on Uma's face, half-tearful, half-smiling, all this is unforgettably and immortally conveyed in this piece of sculpture.

The Hoysalas, who ruled from the 12th to the 13th century in what is now Mysore State, also made a distinctive contribution to the architecture of South India. Though simple in construction, as compared to the later southern temples, the Hoysala temples are extremely rich in decoration and full of charming ingenuity. A marked feature of many of these temples is their star pattern. Noted among them are the temples of Belur, Halebid and Somnathpur, most of which are dedicated to Krishna. In the temple of Chenna Kesava in Belur is an intricately carved pillar that can revolve on its axis. An enormous Ganesha, the Elephant God, in the temple at

Halebid and the colossal 60-foot high Gomateswara statue in Sravana Belgola are other outstanding examples of Hoysala genius.

The basic structure of a South-Indian temple is simple. There is an outer rectangular walled-in enclosure with the entrance in the east. Most temples have two gopuras or gateways—one in the east, one in the south—but they may have more. The gopura must be at least twice as high as it is broad while the northern gopura in the Meenakshi temple is eleven storeys high. There is usually another inner enclosure which houses the main shrine and which devotees encircle three or more times, the number being uneven. At the entrance to this is the Balipidha or stone altar for offerings. And behind this is the Dwajasthambha or flag-pole. Each temple or group of temples has its own flag which is only used on special occasions. The Dwajasthambha is generally plated in brass, copper or gold and is a landmark for devout pilgrims. Beyond this flagpole is a Garuda or Hanuman if it is a temple to Vishnu and a Nandi, or recumbent bull, the vehicle of Siva, if it is a Siva temple. (The fine Hanuman image in a temple at Bangalore is supposed to shed actual tears on the birthday of the lord Rama, just as on the figure of Christ in a certain Church the palms and feet are supposed to bleed on a particular day. One of the most noted of the Nandi bulls is the one in the Lepakshi temple in Andhra which is carved with infinite care out of one solid rock and is 15 feet high and 27 feet long.) The walls of the inner enclosure are often fitted with myriads of lamps, all of which are only lighted at festivals. The Sri Padmanabha temple in Trivandrum has one hundred thousand of these lamps, all of which are lighted together only once in six years in a ceremony known as "laksha deepam". The outer and inner enclosures contain the offices, store-rooms and record rooms of the temples, as well as rooms for the preparation of the various 'poojas' or ceremonies and the temple kitchens or Madapalli where vast quantities of food are prepared daily, offered in token to the deity and then distributed to the temple employees and the poor. Along these courtyards too the temple-elephants, decked out in all splendour and bearing vigrahas, parade on special occasions.

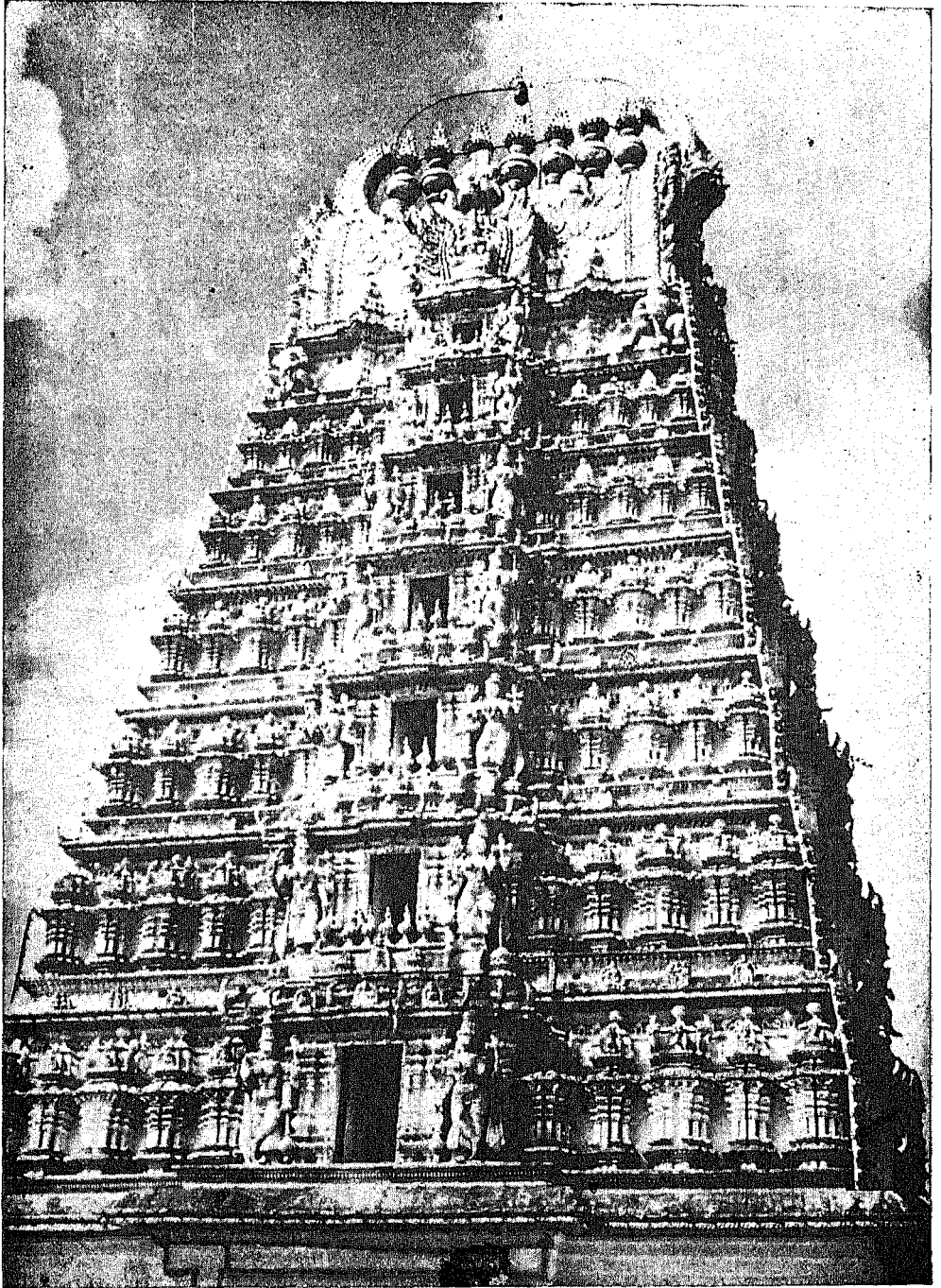
The inner enclosure houses the shrine itself and is distinguished for the carvings on its walls, ceiling, doorways, columns and cornices, for the intricate workmanship on its mandapams and for its exquisitely slender pillars that are a hallmark of southern temples. Whole legends are often carved into or painted on the walls. The carvings range the whole gamut of Hindu lore—gods and goddesses, men and monkeys, birds and serpents, dwarfs and demons. Dwara-palakas or door-guardians, Bhaktas in attitudes of devotion or offering, Gandharvas and other celestial beings all are portrayed. Generally the carvings depict stories from the ancient epics: often they depict the ten incarnations of Vishnu; sometimes they are life-size sculptures of patron-kings and their spouses; occasionally they are dynamic likenesses of dancers and musicians—the various mudras or hand-gestures of the art of Bharat Natyam or the various Yoga asanas or postures are also shown. All the ingenuity and skilful cunning of the artists is given full play in these temples. For instance there is a cluster of seven pillars in the temple at Suchindram—a sort of masculine counterpart of the Kanya Kumari temple—each one of which on being struck sounds the seven separate notes of the Indian musical scale. Or again, in all the vast edifice of the Madura Meenakshi temple, there is only one spot, a foot square, from where the two domes of the two sanctum sanctorum are simultaneously visible. The amazing feature is that the sculptor or sculptors remain, as is often the case, completely unknown, completely anonymous. Apart from these carvings there are also inscriptions on the pillars, either containing passages from the Vedas or Upanishads, or narrating the origin and history of the temple or naming the kings and ministers who patronized the temple and the endowments they made to it. Some of these inscriptions are in the Brahmi script dating back to the time of Asoka.

The Mandapams are halls or pavilions for worshippers and there may be one or more depending on the size and structure of each temple. The main mandapam is situated opposite the main shrine. The massive mandapam in front of the reclining Vishnu, stretching across three rooms of the Trivandrum temple, is made of

one solid piece of granite. This temple, like the one in Srirangam, also boasts of a thousand-column mandapam.

To the south of the inner enclosure there is invariably a shrine to Ganesha, the Elephant-God who overcomes all obstacles. (The Meenakshi temple contains 108 Ganeshas). To the north is usually a shrine to Subramanian the valiant son of Siva-Parvathi or to one of the incarnations of Vishnu. Opposite this is a shrine to Parvathi, or in a Vishnu temple, to Lakshmi his consort, the Goddess of Fortune. There is always a Siva lingam and in a Siva temple there is also a Nateswara, the Lord of dance, or Siva in human form.

In the centre generally facing the East is the main or presiding deity in a quadrangular shrine. This is the 'Garbhagraha', the holy of holies, and it is always lamp-lit. In a Siva temple the Siva lingam, a monolithic conical stone, is the object of worship. But in other temples, especially in Tamilnad, the presiding deity is generally shown in all his, or her, grandeur, with all the attributes and accessories popular associated with him. However, as in some Buddhist sculpture merely the foot print of the Buddha or the wheel of Dhrama is worshipped, so also in some shrines just one simple and typical aspect of the deity is depicted. In some temples to Parvathi, (known also as Meenakshi, Devi, Kali, Durga or Chamunda as in Mysore where she is the patron goddess), such as the very potent Devi temple of Chotanikara in Cochin, the goddess is shown in both her predominant aspects—the benign and the terrible. Most images are made of stone, some of bronze or an alloy of metals able to with-stand the ablutions of centuries; some, especially in Tamil areas, are made of a very fine variety of gold known as 'aparanji' and some of a black, indestructible substance the exact composition of which is not known now. The image is generally covered in silks and precious ornaments, donated by worshippers. There is a legend that the diamond nose-ring on the radiant image in the shore temple at Kanya Kumari so dazzled the crew of a passing ship that it caused the ship to be shattered against the rocks,



Shri Chaumundi Temple Gopuram, Mysore.





The Chaumundi Bull, Mysore. This magnificently carved monolith is of black granite and is situated on the Chaumundi Hill, Mysore, on the way up to the temple of Chaumundi.

Consequently the eastern gateway of the temple facing the ocean is never opened except on one day in the year when the image is taken for immersion in the sea. Actually the main image is made fixed and immovable by an architectural process known as 'ashtabandham' (or eight-fold binding), and is known as the 'modava' or stationary image. A replica of, or substitute for it known as the 'utsava' image is the one that is taken around on ceremonies and processions. These replicas or substitutory images show some of the finest craftsmanship in India. Made of bronze or an alloy of copper, brass, white lead, gold and silver these statues of Lakshmi, Parvathi, or Nataraj among others are exquisitely wrought. The long nose-ridge, slim hips and very slender limbs of the female figures are in marked contrast to their northern counterparts. Unlike the enshrined 'modava' deity these images are displayed in the corridors and passages of the temple for all to see and admire.

The main structural material of a South Indian temple is layer upon layer of great, concrete slabs resting on monolithic columns and definitely suggesting a pre-Aryan influence. However the earliest dated monument of this kind in South India is the small lovely Malagette Sivalaya temple at Badami, dating 625 a.d.

Most of the South Indian temples have their own temple tanks, some of which are as famous as the temple itself. The holy Siva Ganga tank in a Tanjore temple, the temple tank in Chidambaram by bathing in which the leper-king Svetavarra was cured and the tank in Madura which is supposed to contain the seed of Siva and cleanse one of all sins—these are some of the better known ones. A banyan tree is also very often a feature of a temple compound, probably because of its vast, many-rooted and sheltering nature. In the Chotanikkara temple the trunk of such a tree is crowded with iron-nail-heads which are struck into the tree by sick or sorrowing pilgrims with their foreheads or the bare palms of their hands, such being the intensity of their faith. Some temples have their own rest-houses or 'sathrams' too, which probably take the place of caverns for sages and pilgrims found near the more ancient temples.

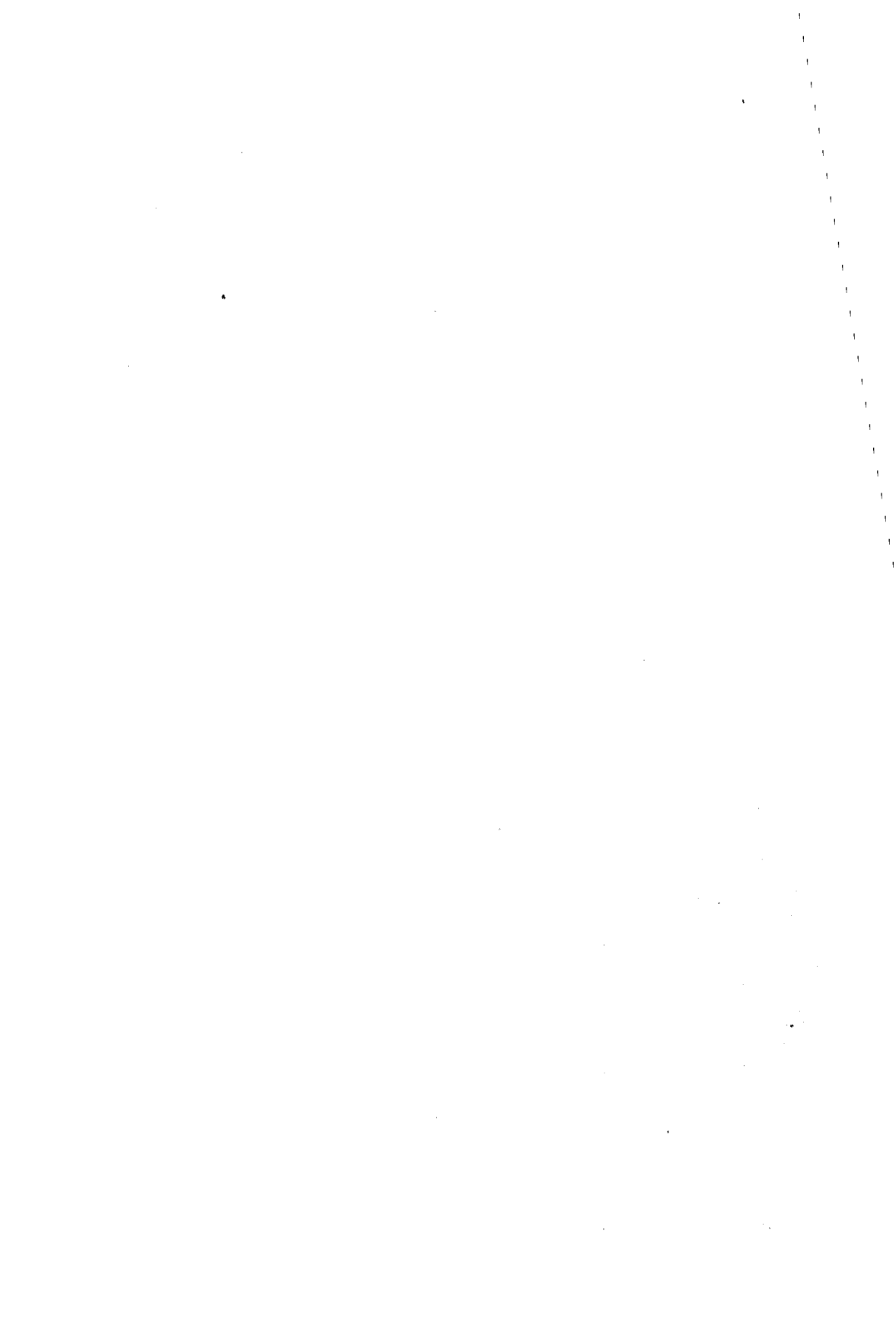
There is one such cavern beside the temple of Alagarkovil near Madura where the great Jaini scholar and teacher Ajjanandi spent many years in prayer and meditation.

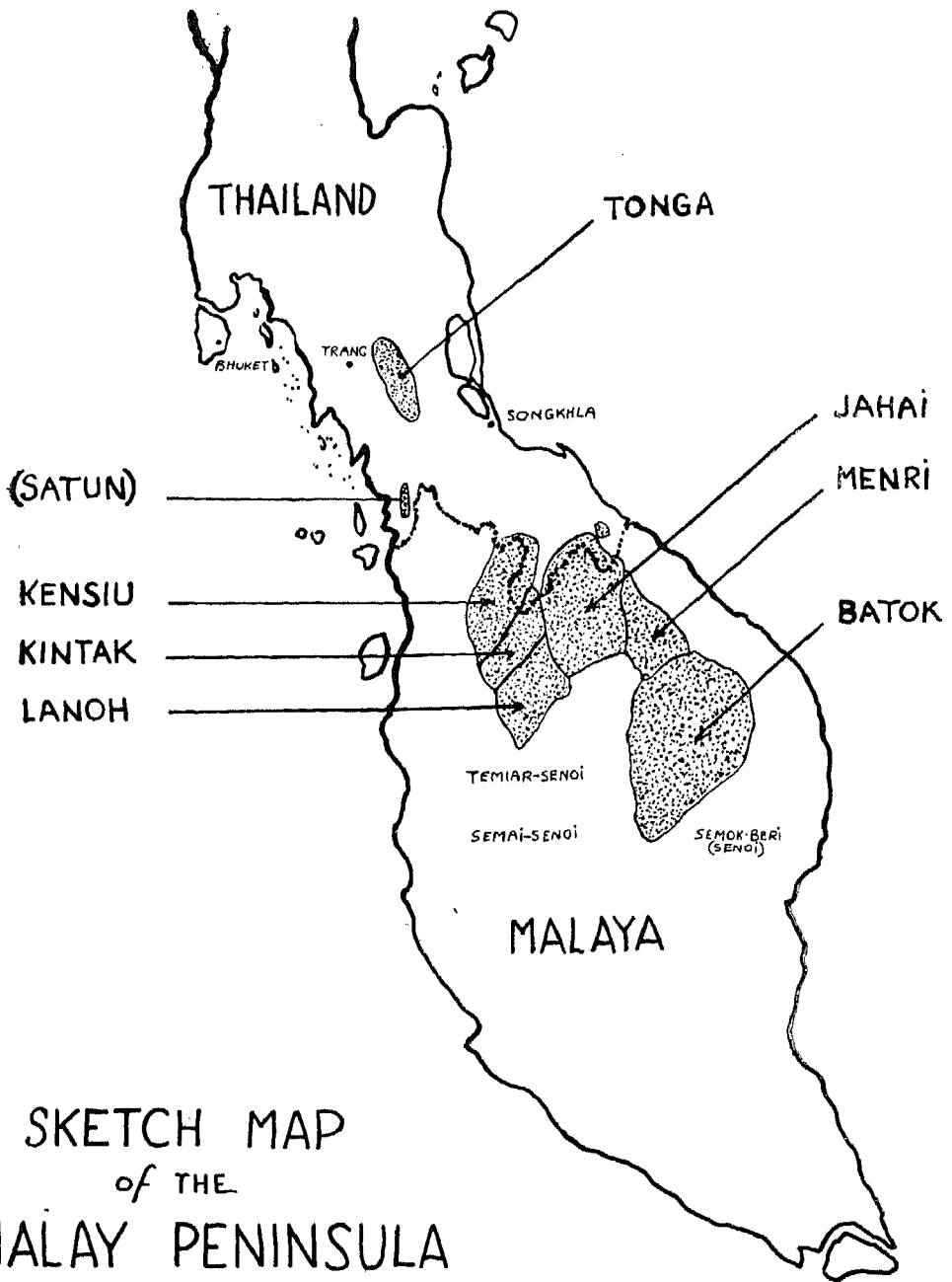
No two southern temples are exactly alike. They vary according to the whims and abilities of their builders and the supposed nature and attitudes of the deities they enshrine. The descriptions, symbols and legends concerning the various deities are diffuse, varied and often interchangeable, for ultimately it must be borne in mind that they are but manifestations or facets of the one Supreme Being, the Eternal Spirit. The temples vary too in the requirements of cleanliness and the rules of orthodoxy. In the Krishna temple of Guruvayoor—that Mecca of Kerala's Hindus—such are the strictures on physical cleanliness that any impurity within the temple walls—be it even the urine of an infant—sets in motion a vast purification process. They vary also in size from the stupendous structures at Tanjore and Madura to the little kovils dotting the south Indian countryside which consist of one tiny unadorned shrine and are maintained by one family or one community. They vary in structure from the more square, sprawling temples of Kerala to the soaring, many-tiered edifices of Madras State with their many pillars and immense corridors. In fact the longest corridor in the world is the corridor in the Rama temple of Rameswaram. Finally they vary according to the wealth and tastes of their donors and patrons, who were usually of royal blood.

Each temple or group of temples had its own patrons who maintained or renovated the temple, contributed generously to the temple coffers, regulated its functions or appointed its functionaries and in general enhanced its reputation. Under their auspices the temple was the centre of cultural life where the arts of music, astrology, astronomy, sculpture and dance flourished. The classical form of dancing, known as Bharat Natyam, originated in these temples, and music is an essential feature of these temples even today. Some temples like the great Supramanya temple in Palani have the best orchestras in South India, while the most famous composers were

inspired by religious themes. The great Thyagaraja composed hundreds of lovely Telugu songs mainly in praise of Rama; the Tamil composer Dikshitar sang movingly of Subramanyan and the Malayalee ruler Swathi Thirunal composed chiefly in praise of Padmanabha or Vishnu, the patron God of Travancore. Even the Trimurthi or Holy Trinity of Hinduism are each associated with a particular musical instrument: the Veena, an ancient seven-stringed musical instrument, is associated with Brahma, the Creator, through his consort Saraswathi; the flute is always associated with Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu the Preserver, and the Damru with Siva the Destroyer. Apart from being the hub of artistic and cultural life the temple premises were the scene of lengthy and profound philosophic discussions, attracting intellectuals from distant parts of the country. Indeed the life of a village or a town centred in and around the temple. Here, in its courtyards, merchants displayed their wares, and still do, sadhus meditated, beggars begged, teachers taught, soldiers were recruited and kings, diplomats and generals held political and military parleys.

For, especially since the opening of the temples to all Hindus regardless of caste, the south Indian temple is the very centre of the average Hindu family's existence—the solace of the bereaved, the haven of the lonely, the recreation of the bored. Its functions and festivals are the milestones of their year; its music and bells chiming over the neighbourhood at precise intervals are the landmarks of their day. Yet—for Hinduism is a tolerant religion—there is no air of compulsion or dogmatism about temple-going. One need not go to a temple every Sunday or every Friday or indeed on any other day. One need never even go at all and can still remain, and be accepted as, a perfectly good Hindu. Ultimately and above all, these temples are but the receptacles, the expression, of a profound faith that is as overwhelming as it is ageless.





SKETCH MAP
of THE
MALAY PENINSULA
SHOWING DISTRIBUTION of NEGRITO BANDS

