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Tamil Temples

Traditional and Transcultural
Thirty-Three Sketches

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Preface

The following sketches are temporal spot-lights, about 20 years old; momentary shots and intentionally not updated. We aim to present the temples as we saw them, in the first years of the third millennium, unaffected by two decades of multifarious development.

We had considered the possibility of giving a brief introduction to each of the major deities, but soon rejected the idea. This book is about Tamil temples, it is not a general introduction to Hinduism. For those who want introductory information, or seek to refresh it, there are reliable compendia such as: U. Schneider: *Einführung in den Hinduismus*, 1989. – H. D. Smith/ N. Chary, M.: *Handbook of Hindu Gods, Goddesses and Saints*, 1991. – V. Moeller: *Die Mythologie der vedischen Religion und des Hinduismus*, [1966]. – J. Gonda: *Die Religionen Indiens: II Der jüngere Hinduismus*, 1963. – K. Meisig: *Shivas Tanz. Der Hinduismus*, 1996/2003; etc.

We have chosen three methods of presentation for our materials: text, picture and ground plan. All three are equally important. Notably, the text relies on the pictures and the ground plans, and *vice versā*. The pictures are printed as close to the relevant text as possible, and deliberately not in a separate section of the book. In addition, the reader is always asked to consult each temple's ground plan while looking at the text and pictures. These methods will fully convey the comprehensive religio-historical information. The pictures are printed in colour, as the colours are part of the liturgy.

Our thanks are due to the temple operators and staff, without whose cooperation these thirty-three sketches of Tamil temples wouldn't have been possible.

Hamm, January 2024   *Konrad Meisig · Marion Meisig*

Introduction

Pañcamukha – The Five Heads of Modern Hinduism

The five heads of modern Hinduism are: (1) traditional or orthodox Hinduism, (2) Neo-Hinduism, (3) commercial Hinduism, (4) political Hinduism, and (5) emigrant Hinduism.

(1) Traditional Hinduism

Traditional or orthodox Hinduism is characterised by: (1.1.) the folk-religious bonds with the cultural area of South Asia, (1.2.) the socio-religious affiliation to a caste and (1.3.) henotheism, i.e. devotion to a favourite god, an iṣṭadevatā.

 (1.1) Traditional Hinduism as a folk religion. Hinduism has developed over the last three and half millennia in the cultural area of South Asia. It is a conglomeration of most heterogeneous religious beliefs and practices.

Traditional Hinduism consists of three strata:

Superstratum

Mainstream

Substratum

• *Substratum*: To begin at ground level, there are the innumerable autochthonous cults, represented by the varied village deities.

• *Mainstream*: The Vedic religion of the Indo-Arian immigrants superseded the indigenous cults in the middle of the second millennium B.C. The blending of both – of the autochthonous elements with the foreign Vedic beliefs and rituals – has created what we can observe today as *Mainstream Hinduism*. Even today there is still a marked difference between North Indian and South Indian Hinduism, characterised, roughly speaking, by a predominance of the indigenous elements in the south.

• *Superstratum*: On the intellectual level, we find the philosophical and cultic superstructure, represented by the texts of the Tāntric and Āgamic theological schools.

(1.2) The socio-religious affiliation to a caste. A person becomes a Hindu by being born into a caste. One cannot convert to traditional Hinduism so consequently there is no proselytising.

It is a fundamental right of the Indian constitution (part III, article 15, paragraph 2) that no person must be discriminated against on the grounds of caste affiliation.

On the other hand, no one will deny that the majority of Indians strictly follow the traditional caste rules concerning:

- food, cooking and eating
- marriage
- occupation

Abolition of the caste system is a claim, not a reality. It is comparable to the realisation of democracy, in India as well as in western countries. The Indian caste system is not waning but waxing. It is growing by cell division. Each of the Indian castes (around 3.000) tries to seal itself off in a downwards direction against the efforts of lower castes trying to climb up the hierarchy. In an upwards direction, each strives to join one of the higher castes above. As a result, new sub-castes emerge in the vertical transitional zones of the caste system.

(1.3) Henotheism. Thirdly, traditional Hinduism is marked by its henotheism, the devotion to a personal 'favourite deity,' called iṣṭadevatā (or iṣṭadeva) in Sanskrit. Such favourite gods are Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva, Gaṇeśa, his South Indian half-brother Murugan (Sanskrit Skanda), or goddesses like Kālī, Durgā, or Mīnākṣī, among others. Such devotion to a favourite god does not exclude the worship of extra deities in their special function, e.g., as 'Remover of Obstacles' (Vighneśvara = Gaṇeśa), who is the patron of business and science. Pure monotheism also exists as one of the varieties of Hinduism. It appeared for the first time in the first half of the second century B.C., namely in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

(2) Neo-Hinduism

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, traditional Hinduism has been complemented by Neo-Hinduism. The new Neo-Hindu movements like Ārya Samāj, or religious teachers like Vivekānanda and Aurobindo, originated during colonial times. Neo-Hinduism results from Indian thinkers being in contact with non-Indian religions, philosophies and egalitarian social teachings. The distinctive marks of Neo-Hinduism are

- missionary work in India and overseas
- social reforms and relaxation of precepts regarding caste, ritual and purity
- religious syncretism

(3) Commercial Hinduism

Commercial Hinduism is represented by organisations like 'Transcendental Meditation' founded by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; the 'Rajneesh Foundation International' of 'Bhagwan' Shree Rajneesh (1931-1990, who changed his title into Oshō 和尚 in 1989, Japanese for 'Buddhist priest'); the Hare Krishna Mission or ISKCON ('International Society for Krishna Consciousness'), founded in 1966 by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896-1977) or the organisation of Sai Baba, who is said

to be worshipped by over five millions devotees worldwide. The distinctive features of commercial Hinduism are:
- missionary work, done by Indian founders, predominantly outside India
- business companies, including aggressive, profit-maximising marketing
- devotees' emotional naïveté and belief in miracles

(4) Political Hinduism

Political Hinduism is either non-violent or violent. Both forms are characterised by their mingling of the sacred and the secular, by the religious motivation behind profane goals.

(4.1) Political Hinduism: Non-Violent. The most prominent representative of non-violent political Hinduism is Mahatma Gandhi. It was he who transformed the ideals of the Old Indian warrior and ascetic ethics into methods of non-violent political argument. He adopted elements of traditional Yoga (cf. *Yogasūtra* 2,30) – like non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-acquisitiveness (*aparigraha*), chastity (*brahmacārya*) and fasting (*upavāsa*) – and moulded them into political techniques like civil disobedience, non-cooperation and hunger strikes.

(4.2) Political Hinduism: Violent. The Hindu fundamentalists claim the absoluteness of Hindu dharma, the Hindu religion (also for non-Hindus). They demand validity of the sacred Hindu law in the secular sphere. They legitimate violence by reference to motifs and characters taken from Hindu mythology like Kṛṣṇa, Rāma of Ayodhyā or Hanumān. Their main organisation is the VHP (Viśva Hindū Pariṣad, founded in 1964) with its youth task force, the Bajrang Dal, named after Vajrāṅga, 'Whose muscles are as hard as diamond' (viz. Hanumān, the monkey general and Rāma's – the hero-god – helpmate). The Hindu fundamentalists' legal arm is the BJP (Bhāratīya Janatā Party), the largest party in the coalition of the National Democratic Alliance government in the 1999-2004 legislative period (and in 2023, leader of the present-day government).

With over 10 million members and even more followers, Hindu fundamentalism is the most powerful and predominant force in modern Hinduism. Like the business firms of commercial Hinduism, the VHP operates globally.

(5) Emigrant Hinduism

Hinduism, with approximately 800 million followers and globally, the third largest religious community after Christianity and Islam, is currently in the process of changing from a folk religion into a world religion. Traditionally limited to the region of Southern and South-eastern Asia, it was disseminated world-wide by modern migration. Since the 1980s, Tamil refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka, in particular from Jaffna in the Northern region of the island, have settled in exile groups mostly in Europe and America by the hundreds of thousands. This process of migration is not limited to specific countries. It has a global perspective. In Germany, there are about 60.000 refugees from Sri Lanka living permanently in the country and in the Canadian Greater Toronto Area, a metropolis of immigrants, there are some 250.000.

Most of them had made a stopover during their flight, first in Germany, then in France, or some in Norway.

As a result of this process, Hinduism has become a tangible factor of Germany's, and of course other countries', cultural life. The South Asian religion is present in the German public conscience. This development is a novelty and it stirs up a growing attention among the local people. The press and the media cannot neglect this public desire for information. To a formerly unknown degree, press articles and leaflets appear in regional and national newspapers. Also, the Christian churches observe the alien religion with interest, if not concern.

In the meantime, many of the Tamil immigrants have gained official status as asylum seekers; more and more of them are acquiring German citizenship. They have found jobs and have settled, together with their families, in their new homes.

The more these immigrants are being integrated, the stronger their need to establish their religion overseas in their new homes. They hand it over to their children, to the second generation, which has started to become estranged to the customs and traditional way of life of their elders. In the beginning, the Hindu cult of Tamil immigrants took place in, for example, garages in front of tiny devotional pictures. Tamil migrants have, since the middle of the 1990s but mostly since the year 2000, built Śaiva temples. They have transferred the temple cult along with seasonal festivals and attained a vibrant community life – modelled after the pattern of their South Indian and Sri Lankan homeland but with significant modifications, transformations and altered functions resulting from new circumstances and pressures to accommodate to an immigrant status.

From 1994 to 2002, in the German North Rhine-Westphalian city of Hamm alone, three Hindu temples were founded: one for the elephant-headed god Gaṇeśa on the 12th of June 1994, one for his half-brother, the lance holder Murugan, on the 7th of February 2001 and one for the fertility goddess Kāmākṣī on the 7th of July 2002. The industrial town of Hamm, which was formerly considered interesting (at best) by the region due to having the second largest railway shunting yard in Europe, has unforeseeably become a hub of Tamil temple cult in Germany.

In the whole of Germany, there are currently (year 2004) 20 Hindu Tamil temples, with an increase in industrial areas like the Ruhr area ('Ruhrgebiet' around Dortmund), and the North (Lower Saxony, Hannover and Bremen). There are two temples in Frankfurt and others in the South, in Munich for example. Outside Germany, we find important temples in Paris (for Gaṇeśa) and London (the Murugan Highgate Hill Temple in London Archway), also in Switzerland (Basle) and Scandinavia (Oslo).

We have stated that Hinduism is currently in the process of changing from a folk religion into a world religion. It must be stressed that it is emigrant Hinduism which is essentially responsible for this epoch-making transformation. The religious metamorphosis of traditional Hinduism does not take place in India itself, but overseas. This makes expat-Hinduism an important object of research for Indologists. Significant changes of present-day Hinduism – alterations which influence the type of Hinduism as a whole, becoming not only a world religion, but rather a universal religion

– cannot be observed in the province of Uṟīṣā, but overseas, outside India and outside Asia, in the kālāpānī, beyond the 'black waters' of the Indian Ocean, in exile. In this situation, the comparison of Hinduism abroad with original Hinduism in India and Sri Lanka enables predictions of the potential chances of development back in the home countries. Overseas Hinduism can only be properly understood by careful comparison with its Indian and Sri Lankan traditional models.

The Layout of Śaiva Tamil Temples

Our description of the layout of Śaiva Tamil temples is based on observations. It does not depend on the rules that traditional scriptures or textbooks (*śilpaśāstra*) would impose. But of course, it will not necessarily contradict them.

   We base the following sketches on four categories of temples, depending on whether their principal deity is Gaṇeśa, Murugan, a goddess (Devī) or Śiva.
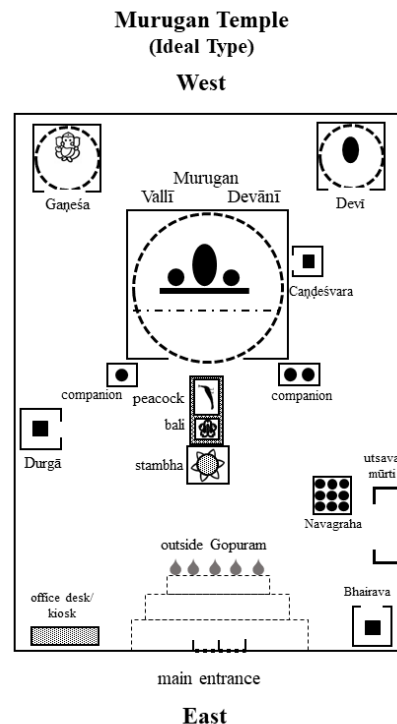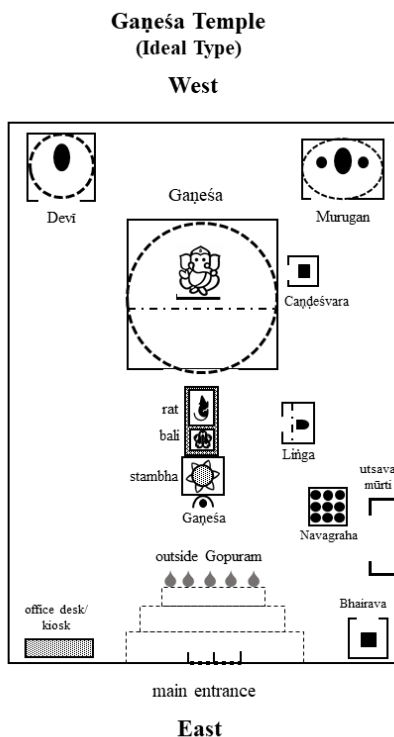
There are several features that these four kinds have in common. Firstly, the main divinity resides in the sanctissimum (*mūlagarbha* or *mūlasthāna*), in the centre of the western part of the temple hall. If possible, the chief deity must face east; except the Devī temples: typically, they are orientated to the south. Accordingly, in our descriptions, we will give all directions, as to right or left, in the perspective of the deity (not that of the observer!) so, when the god looks to the east, right means south and left means north.
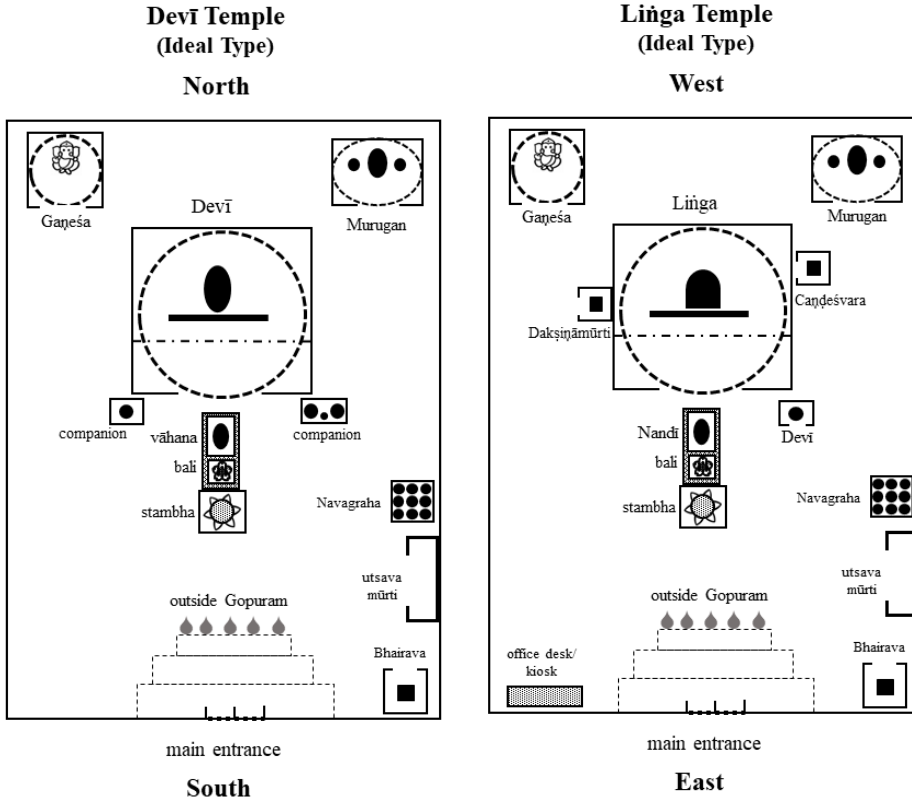
Secondly, the statue of the chief god – or goddess – is made of black granite. Through the inauguration ceremony (*kumbhābhiṣeka*), this sculpture becomes a sthalamūrti, a 'locally fixed statue,' which must never be removed from its place.

Thirdly, immediately in front of the main statue watches its mount (*vāhana*): a rat for Gaṇeśa, a peacock for Murugan, the Devī commands a lion and Śiva a zebu bull. These 'mūrtis' (sculptures) consist of black granite too. Behind the animal, we will find another granite object, namely an egg-shaped lotus bud, the balipīṭha, literally 'bench for offerings,' because it rests on a pedestal that can be used as a devotional table. Mount and lotus bud are completed by the towering metal flagpole (*dhvaja-stambha*) behind, which will be missing only if the temple roof is too low (as is quite often the case in emigrant temple buildings).

W

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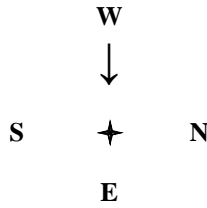
Ideally, this main entrance is where the main deity looks, in the east. On the left side of the entrance gate, to the north, stands a shrine (*maṇḍapa*) for the chief guard of the temple, i.e. for Śiva Bhairava. Śiva is in his awe-inspiring manifestation, recognisable by a trident and his dog, which usually peeps around from behind his right lower leg.

The northern wall. Moreover, along the north wall, we will come across two more shrines, one for the Nine Planets (Navagraha), astrological bodies that are believed by pious devotees to possess forceful, even dangerous powers. They are made of granite, too. The other shrine is the 'spring pavilion' (*vasantamaṇḍapa*), which houses the 'festival statues' (*utsavamūrti*). These are made of bronze – often extremely valuable – and unlike the sthalamūrtis, they *may* be removed from their places, especially during the great annual temple festival (*mahotsava*) in June/July, when the bronze effigy of the chief deity is carried in a solemn procession through the streets and alleys around the temple.

Devī Temple
(Ideal Type)

North

Liṅga Temple
(Ideal Type)

West

Gaṇeśa — Devī — Murugan

companion — vāhana — bali — companion — stambha — Navagraha — utsava mūrti — outside Gopuram — Bhairava — main entrance

South

Gaṇeśa — Liṅga — Murugan — Dakṣiṇāmūrti — Caṇḍeśvara — Nandi — bali — Devī — stambha — Navagraha — utsava mūrti — outside Gopuram — office desk/kiosk — Bhairava — main entrance

East

And now to the differences between the four varieties of Śaiva Tamil temples. It must be underlined in the first place, that all these temples belong to the middle level of what we have termed *mainstream* Hinduism at the outset of this introduction. And this classification will explain many peculiarities. Therefore Gaṇeśa and Murugan are not regarded as divine beings with a quite heterogeneous religious-historical background in the *substratum*, but (according to *mainstream* legends from the Sanskrit epics, chiefly the *Purāṇas*) as brothers. To be exact, as half-brothers, for only Gaṇeśa is said to be Pārvatī's son. Śiva's spouse modelled him out of the remnants of the beauty-paste for her body and breathed him to life; whereas Murugan, who became the god of war, emerged from the semen of his father Śiva and was nourished by his wet-nurses and foster-mothers, the Pleiades. This is why he is also called Ṣaṇmukha, the 'Six-headed One,' because in India and Sri Lanka, people appear to see only *six* Pleiades.

The shrines behind the sanctissimum. This also explains why, in the south-west corner behind the sanctissimum, in a Gaṇeśa temple, there is the shrine of a Devī, thought of – in the *mainstream* – as Gaṇeśa's mother, who deserves a place on the

right side; and why, in a Murugan temple, the mother must be content with the left side behind the dominant god Murugan (usually, however, there is an additional pavilion for Durgā at the south wall in the war-god's temples). The respective half-brother, Murugan or Gaṇeśa, has his pavilion in the opposite corner: Murugan in the north-east, Gaṇeśa in the south-west. In a temple dedicated to one of their parents, be it Śiva or Pārvatī, the half-brothers both have their place behind mother or father, Gaṇeśa to the right and Murugan with his two consorts to the left.

The shrines in front of the sanctissimum. Now we turn to the area in front of the main shrine. In the north-eastern direction, in front of the sanctissimum of a Gaṇeśa temple, we will perceive a shrine or an altar with Śiva's symbol, the Liṅga. In a Śiva temple, there is a shrine for Śiva's spouse, the Devī, on this spot. In the temples of Murugan and those of the Devī, we find pedestals, altars or pavilions with quite different companions on both sides before the sanctum sanctorum.

The smallest shrine in a temple is reserved for the general of Śiva's demonic hordes. He is named Caṇḍeśvara, the 'Fierce Lord.' He keeps watch at the outer side of the northern wall of the sanctissimum. In Śiva temples, sometimes also in kōvils (Tamil for 'temple') of Murugan, there will be, at the opposite, southern wall, a niche for the preaching Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti ('Śiva, the Southern Sculpture').

The south-eastern corner of a temple would be vacant for practical purposes. Usually, there is a small kiosk, where the visitors can buy devotional items such as pūjā tickets, incense, oil lamps, coconuts, pictures of saints, etc. This would also be the place of residence for the porter or temple warden.

Tamil Śaiva temples thus reflect a popular motif, namely that of the peaceful family life of god Śiva as *pater familiās*. He resides on the mountain Kailāsa in the Himālayas, together with his consort Umā (also called Pārvatī, 'Daughter of the mountains') and both their sons, Gaṇeśa and Murugan. Each of the four deities is usually accompanied by the respective mount. Not only the mural (opposite page) in the Kāmākṣī temple in Māṅgāḍu, South India, but also many devotional pictures, or a frieze on the Murugan-Kārttikeya temple in Mādampē, Sri Lankā, present this still-life of the 'holy family.'