

Socio-Economic Functions of Temples during Medieval Tamil Country 11th -16th Century A.D

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Abstract: *The temples were the most powerful economic institutions which not only sustained by means of the generous and continuous endowments from the society, but enabled the other members of the society to turn to it in times of need for economic support. Temples, as landowners, offered immunity to the cultivators of the temple lands, lent money to the cultivators, reduced their upper share (**melvaram**) and even remitted the dues in favour of the cultivators. The selected epigraphs give a striking fact that the medieval temples helped the agrarian society, particularly, during their hard times. Though the temples lent the money to the assemblies and individuals on interest basis their fiscal help to the society to be viewed as very special in terms of socio-economic aspect of the agrarian society.*

Key Words: *cultivators, devadana, kadamai, padikaval, temple, ulavu-kani*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The temple is historically more important as a social and economic entity than as a religious institution.^[1] The Hindu temples attained the zenith of its influence on the socio-economic life of the medieval Tamil country, particularly under the imperial Cholas. This fame, wealth and honour continued thereafter under the patronage of Hindu kings of later Pandya and Vijayanagar. Primarily the temples were a centre for spiritual, art, architecture and culture. In the medieval Tamil country, the temples became very rich institutions by virtue of the huge endowment of lands, gold and money. With this power of wealth, the temples were the most powerful economic institutions which not only sustained by means of the generous and continuous endowments from the society, but enabled the other member of the society to turn to it in times of need for economic support. Nilakanta Sastri states, “The temple and the *matha* were the most notable recipients of gifts in land and cash, and these played an important role in shaping the economic and social life of the neighborhood”.^[2]

As a wealthy institution possessing vast landed property, the services rendered by the temple in the socio-economic sphere in medieval south India were of varied nature. With the surplus wealth, the temples played multifunctional role as a land holder, stimulator of cultivation and agricultural production, employer, and banker. Though the roles of medieval temples were many, the important roles as an employer, banker and an agrarian stimulator, through irrigation and reclamation, are considered in the succeeding discussion. This is because the land was a determining factor in these activities.

II. EMPLOYER

The temples of the early period were mostly simple institutions, in size and function. Moreover, during the early times, the land donations and gifts in cash and kind were made to the temples on a limited scale. So the wealth belonged to them was also limited. Since the temples were simple fewer people only required to carry out the functions of the temple. Hence the employment opportunities with the temples were very less. But during the imperial Chola period and thereafter, huge religious establishments, like Tanjavur Brihadisvara temple, were built. Its construction and maintenance offered employment to numbers of architects and craftsmen who vied with one another in bold planning and skilful execution. Such establishments required more elaborate personnel for their management in various levels with varied capacities. The daily routine, especially of the larger temples, gave constant employment to number of priest, choristers, musicians, dancing girls, florists, cooks and many other classes of servants. So the temples in the medieval Tamil country, was not merely a place of worship. It filled a large place in the socio-economic life of the people.

Appadorai writes, “The position of the Temple as an employer providing work and means of livelihood for a large number of people is the most striking thing in this connection”.^[3] According to Dayalan, the temple played an important role in the socio-economic life as an institution providing ample employment opportunity to a larger number of people.^[4] Thus the temple became a major source of employment for the people, next only to

the State. The strength of the temple establishment varied according to the size and resources. Being a great landlord and possessed enormous wealth due to large endowments in land and cash bestowed on temples, the medieval temples afforded large number of employees and paid them wages by way of lands directly or indirectly. Thus the employment opportunities to the society with the temples directly had an impact in the economic life of the society.

The management of the temple was in the hands of either an individual or a group of persons known as *sthanattar* who administered the temple properties, controlled the temple servants and carefully guarded the interests of the temple.^[5] The temples usually employed various personalities like Priests (*sivacharyas*, *bhattas*), assistants of priests (*tavasigal*), non-brahman priests, scholars and reciters, manager of the temple (*koyil-kelvi*) administration Staffs (*panmahesvaras*), treasurers (*pandarattar*), superintendents (*devakanmigal*), accountants (*koil-kanakku*), musicians, singers, gardeners, artisans, dancing girls. Besides the above the temple also employed many servants mainly for watchmen (*meykaval*), sweeping and smearing of cow-dung in the temple, bringing water, making garlands, looking after the lamps (*tiruvilakkukkudi*), pounding the paddy to remove husk from the rice for sacred food offering, carrying plates along with the deity during the festival occasions, waving the fly whisks to the deity and for many other menial works.

The huge number of employees deployed in the temple services in the middle ages made the position of the temple as an employer of considerable important. A eleventh century Tanjore inscriptions of Rajaraja I attest to this. An eleventh century inscription Tanjavur of Rajaraja I records that 400 dancing girls were assigned each a share (*pangu*) comprising a house and one *veli* of land yielding a net revenue of 100 *kalam* of paddy. The second part of the inscription also records a list of male temple servants (about 200), viz., dancing-masters, musicians, drummers, singers, accountants, superintendent of temple women and the female musicians, parasol-bearers, lamp lighters, watermen, potters, washer-men, barbers, astrologers, tailors, a brazier, master-carpenter (*tachch-acharya*), carpenters, a goldsmith and others. Each of them assigned one or more shares of the same yielding capacity of above mentioned.^[6]

An inscription from Jambai, South Arcot district, dated 1068 A.D issued in the reign of Virarajendra, records the grant of tax free land of 500 *kuli* in the *devadana* village Tagadi and in addition, another 40 *kuli* of land (as house site and garden) to one Arangan Sendan for looking after all the accounts of the temple. Besides permanent employees, the temple also sometimes employed labour for temporary work such as executing the repairs in the shrine, and the wages paid took the form of gift of land and a house-site. Another thirteenth century epigraph from Tiruvilimilalai issued in the reign of Rajaraja III records a gift land and house site to a carpenter (*tachchachari*) for executing the repairs in the shrines of Ninraruliya-Nayanar and Nerivarkulali-Nachchiar in the Vilinathasvamin temple of the place.^[7]

Though the later Pandya and Vijayanagar epigraphs are not like Tanjavur epigraphs which give an elaborate account on the appointment of temple servants, the available epigraphs are sufficient to construct the subject. The later Pandyas reign also noticed similar appointments of servants for various services in the temple. An inscription from Jambai, South Arcot district, dated 1300 A.D issued in the reign of Maravarman Kulasekhara I records the alienation of 900 *kuli* of dry land at Mananduyyaperumal-nallur which was a tax-free *devadana* of the temple in favour of a Brahman of Manalur for his services on the days of festival in the temple. It is stated that the *sthanikas* received from him 31 *panam* in lump sum for the payment of *kadamai* on the land levied by the *nadu*.^[8]

A fourteenth century inscription found at Narttamalai, Tiruchirappalli district, issued in the reign of Jatavarman Parakrama Pandya records the distribution of 10 *ma* of land belonging to the temple to ten *devaradiyar* for serving in the temple twice a day by the *Uravar*.^[9] Tiruppanangadu inscriptions attest to the employment of number of people in the temples for various services during the Vijayanagar period. Another inscription from the same place dated 1380 A.D issued in the reign of Kampana-Udaiyar records the appointment of three shepherd residents of the place as *tiruvilakkukkudi* for the supply of 1 *alakku* of ghee and 2 *nali* of milk each for god in the temple.^[10] It is told that necessary endowments were made to the shepherds. A fifteenth century inscription from Triuppudaimaruthur, Tirunelveli district, dated 1499 A.D records the grant of land and daily food to a dancing girl (*devaradiyar*) Kalattinatha-Manikkattal and her descendants for their services in the temple by the temple authorities.^[11] Likewise, a sixteenth century inscription from Tiruvadi, South Arcot district, records the gift of 2 *ma* of wet land, 1 *ma* of dry land and a house-site to a poet who compose poems for the god by the temple authorities.^[12]

Numerous other inscriptions suggest that the employment of temple servants and assignment of land for their maintenance, viz., for cleaning the temple floor,^[13] keeping the sanctuary lamp alight,^[14] keeping the temple yard clean,^[15] persons who fetched water for bathing the deity,^[16] cooking in the temple kitchen,^[17] tending the temple garden,^[18] drummers,^[19] conch-blowers,^[20] stone-masons,^[21] songsters,^[22] potters,^[23] carpenters,^[24] *bhattas*,^[25] *sivabhramans*,^[26] dancing girls,^[27] and goldsmith^[28] was very much in vogue during the period under study. Besides assigning lands to the temple servants as wages for their services, temples also paid them in way of kind,^[29] kind and money^[30] or money.^[31] The appointment of most of the temple servants

was generally hereditary. Tanjavur inscription of Rajaraja I refer to an order of appointment of various temple servants states the details of who should follow to the position in case of death or migration of the present one^[32]. An epigraph from Puvalaikkudi, Pudukkottai district, records the appointment of drummers hereditarily by the temple authorities also attest to this.^[33] The eligible descendants of the temple servants had the right to hold the same post.^[34]

It seems that the temple servants did not have full ownership right on the allotted lands. They were not supposed to sell or mortgage these lands and they were only entitled to enjoy the income or revenue of that land. In cases where lands were granted to the servants as remuneration for their services, they were strictly prohibited from selling or mortgaging them on any account. A fifteenth century epigraph from Triuppakkuli registers the distribution of lands to the several servants of the temple by the temple authorities. This epigraph records interesting fact that the lands concerned, which were service *inams* were neither to be sold nor mortgaged by the parties who received them and specifies that if they sold or mortgaged the lands, they would suffer the punishment that traitors to the king and to the community would suffer and in addition, would be liable to a fine imposed by the officers of the temple treasury.^[35] The temples of the medieval ages not only provided ample employment opportunities to the then society but also enhanced them to earn a respectable position in the society.

III. IRRIGATION

The contribution of State to the agricultural development by providing irrigational facilities viz., mega sized artificial reservoirs, dams, canals and small channels across the Tamil country is noteworthy. Likewise, from the epigraphic evidences, the contribution of medieval temples in the area of irrigation to develop agriculture is worth mentioning and it was no way less than the contribution of the State. As a wealthy institution, possessing vast landed property and huge money by way of donations and grants, temples occupied a prominent place and its activities in the realm of irrigation for agricultural developments. Many villages were gifted to temples as *devadana* is evidenced from the epigraphs. But it seems all such villages did not have the irrigational facilities. In such cases, the temples constructed tanks and other irrigational facilities at their own cost to boost the agriculture, at least within their territory of control. A thirteenth century inscription of Kulottunga Chola III found at Tirukkachchur records the *devadana* hamlet was owned by some individuals who with the help of temple dug a tank called *Periyadevapputteri* and put up a sluice to it at the cost of temple.^[36] It is mentioned that the temple authorities agreed to irrigate the lands of both the villages from the water of the same tank, at certain proportion.

Though temples were very wealthy and contributed to the irrigation and reclamation front in order to help the villagers, they often encouraged individual also to take part in such activities. In doing so, the temples gifted tax-free lands to the individuals as a token of encouragement. An inscription from Tiruvannamalai dated 1202 A.D, issued in the reign of Kulottunga Chola III records the encouragement given by the temple to the private individuals by granting a portion of its lands as tax-free for the individual's contribution in constructing a tank in order to reclaim and irrigate lands.^[37] Under the terms of such grants the temple allowed the grantees to cut down the jungle, form a village, plot out fields, and enjoy three parts of the income from the village and pay to the temple treasury the remaining one-fourth part. In such cases, the temple expected the donee to keep the tank in good repair.^[38]

The villages often encountered the breaches in irrigation tanks and consequently the agriculturists left their cultivated lands fallow for long time due to non-availability of funds. In such cases, temple authorities often extended their helping hand to the villagers by selling the lands belonged to temples for repairing the breaches in the village tanks. This is attested by an inscription from Tiruppanangadu, North Arcot District, dated 1383 A.D issued in the reign of Virupaksha II registers the sale of wet and dry lands belonging to temple for 50 *panam* to certain individuals. With this sale amount the temple authorities repaired the breach in the local tank called *Sadaiyeri* which had left the lands of the whole village uncultivated and fallow for a long time, as there was no fund with the *urars* to do the repair.^[39] This is a remarkable instance of help extended by the temple towards the village in distress without anticipating any return fiscal benefits.

From the inscriptional evidences, it is learnt that temples in medieval ages actively participated to reclaim the forest or waste lands, irrigational works to bring the land under effective cultivation and leasing the lands to cultivators. Cultivators were also attracted by the favorable tenancy conditions proposed by the temples. The temples share was always the *melvaram* (major) share only; whereas the cultivators of the temple villages, as holders of the *kudivaram* (minor) share of income, realized enhanced incomes on account of the capital improvement done to the irrigation and canal systems by the temple. The cultivators also benefited materially from the capital investment, since the investment was spent mainly for labour services in the construction of irrigation canals.

IV. LAND RECLAMATION

As reclamation of jungle lands and waste lands was an important aspect of agricultural development or expansion, the medieval temples played a conspicuous role in this sector. In economic point of view, the reclamation activities of temples yielded fruitful results. The temple authorities employed a system of 'favourable-lease' to induce people to take up to reclamation. While favourably leasing the temple lands to cultivators to reclaim, the temples categorically mentions that the donee should not keep the lands without cultivating them and that mounds and low grounds should be leveled and the jungle removed.^[40] It not only helped to increase the cultivation area and boosted the agricultural produce but also benefited the agriculturists economically. Another concession consisted in granting certain miscellaneous privileges connected with the temples which were highly valued for the honour they conferred on a person. A village had been lying waste for a long time, and new tenants were unwilling to bring it back to cultivation. A certain Sakkadevar Vettuvakkattan and his brother got tenants for the village and resettled it. They were given the right of *padikaval* over the particular village surrounding the temple, receiving the customary donations and fees, after allowing common rights and cultivating and paying the usual dues to the temple. They were also allowed the honour or receiving the sacred cloth (*parivattam*), tirtha and the sacred ashes from the temple.^[41]

The temple authorities of Srirangam temple, Trichinopoly district, undertook massive reclamation activities of flood damaged and sand cast *devadana* lands during the reigns of Kulottunga Chola I and Vikrama Chola spanning from the latter half of eleventh century to the earlier half of twelfth century. In order to reclaim these lands, the temple authorities sold out such sand casted lands to agriculturists on very much favourable terms. The temple assigned these lands to the vendors for making flower garden and stipulated them to measure 8 *kalams* of paddy per *veli* as per *punsey-varisai* (dues applicable to dry land) the temple treasury (*Sribhandaram*).^[42] The temple also gave a time frame of 5 years to complete the reclamation by the vendors and to bring the land fit for cultivation.^[43] Another interesting point to be noted is that the above lands were purchased by big landlords having *araiyan, velan, nadalvan* titles which is known from their names viz., Muvendavelan, Ilangovelar, Kidaratarayar, Turumur-Udaiyan Araiyan, Ponparri-Udaiyan Araiyan Senan, Solavijayavelar, Adalaiyurnadalvan, Enadi Araiyan and so on. The sale amount of the lands was invested by temple authorities in jewels to the god.^[44] It seems such activities of reclamation initiated by the temple resulted benefits not only to the temple but also to the landowners or tenants who undertook reclamation.

An inscriptions from Iluppur, Pudukkottai district, dated 1298 A.D issued in the reign of Maravarman Virapandiya records the reduction of *kadamai* taxes on temple lands by the temple authorities to facilitate the tenants to reclaim the cultivated lands.^[45] It is mentioned that the cultivators were eased to pay only three-fourth *varisai* i.e., 25% tax remission offered to the cultivators by the temple. The temples attracted the landowners and cultivators towards the waste lands of temples to reclaim. The temples usually asked the landowners or cultivators to pay in terms of items required for daily requirements. A twelfth century Tirukkadaiyur epigraph records the reclamation of 700 *kuli* of land belonged to temple by two individuals who had *kani* (landowners) at Mulangudi and agreed to measure out 1 *ulakku* of ghee every day to burn the lamps.^[46] Another system was that by way of leasing the lands, to be reclaimed, at concessional annual rents. The rents were gradually increased by the temple until it reached a certain amount and fixed thereafter perpetually. Under this system of reclamation the clearing and leveling of land and the provision of irrigation were conditions of tenancy. An inscription from Tiruvetpur, records on condition to improve the land and to pay progressive assessments, until third year. The full assessment stated as *talaivarisai* – 15 *kalam* per *ma*. The graduated scale stipulated that 1/2 *varisai* for the first year, 3/4 *varisai* for the second year and full assessment from third year onwards.^[47] Apparently, the intention was to allow adjustments for inferior fertility in land on actual.

Another fifteenth century records of Virupaksha II contains some interesting information in regards to the facilities afforded to the tenants for bringing waste lands under cultivation by providing irrigational facility. On account of the land's high level, it was un-irrigable and was therefore lying waste from time immemorial (*anadikarambu*) overgrown with heath and other wild shrubs, was purchased as *ulvaukkani*. Its profitless level was tackled and then made irrigable by means of a new channel. It is stated that the income accruing from the land, as thus improved, was distributed between and Varadaraja and Tirumalisai Alvar temples in a certain ratio.^[48] The treasury of Tirumalisai Alvar purchased as *ulavukani* two pieces of land which were in the possession of the temple at Padaiparru alias Tepperumalnallur. The lands were till then uncultivated on account of their non-irrigable high level. They were soon reclaimed and brought under cultivation and leased out for two hundred *panams* per year.^[49]

The temples authorities, at times, offered *ulavu-kani* or *ulavu-kaniyakshi* which consisted of permanent lease of an uncultivated waste which the lessee was authorized to reclaim and to settle, to grow crops that suited him, wet or dry, including plantain, sugarcane, turmeric, ginger, areca and coconut, and after doing this, to pay the taxes in gold and in grain.^[50]

V. BANKER

The large endowments in the form of land, gold and money bestowed on temples by the various donors of the medieval society made the temples a richest institution. Particularly, many donors, from royal family to the individuals, donated in gold and money to the temples.^[51] Due to the availability of enormous amount of money, the medieval temples delivered an economic function as a banker which was really helped the agrarian society at that time. The deposits received by the medieval temples were of donatives in nature. They were made for certain specific purposes.^[52] Those donations were not repayable to the depositor. At the same time, the temples had no rights to use them for some other purpose rather than the specified by the donor. So the temples lend those donated money to the society on interest basis.^[53] Generally the loans were given by the temple on the condition that either the interest should be paid back to the temple in cash or some specified items should be supplied to the temple in lieu of the interest. From the interest the temples fulfilled the purpose for which the donations were made. The temples played a prominent role in mobilizing funds within a region by giving loans to the village assemblies for their various needs. Among the clients of temple bank, village assemblies were predominant. A number of village assemblies said to have received money thus borrowed was utilized in bringing waste lands under cultivation. From the produce of these lands the interest on the money borrowed was paid. The money itself was apparently never returned. Village assemblies could alienate lands whenever the liabilities incurred by them could not be otherwise discharged.^[54]

A twelfth century epigraph from Erumbur, South Arcot district, issued in the reign of Rajaraja II records that a private individual purchased land from the village assembly of Urumur and made a gift of it to the temple as *devadana*. Towards the payment of *kadamai* on these lands the assembly agreed to measure out to the temple trustees 55 *kalam*s of paddy. But owing to famine, they could not maintain it. Therefore they borrowed 60 *kasu* for interest from the temple treasury to manage the situation.^[55] Another inscription of Rajaraja II in Alangudi, Tanjore district registers that the village appears to have been afflicted with a famine caused probably by failure of rain. The inhabitants of the village applied to the local temple treasury. The temple helped the distressed by giving 1011 *kalanju* of gold and 464 *palam* of silver. In exchange of this, the members of the village assembly alienated $8\frac{3}{4}$ *veli* of land in favour of the god. From the produce of this land the interest to be paid.^[56]

The temples lend money to individuals also. An inscription from Kodumbalur, dated 1269 A.D, issued in the reign of Jatavarman Vira Pandya records that certain Kaikolas and Kaikkola-mudalis borrowed money from the Tirumudukunramudaiya-Nayanar temple on interest basis.^[57] It is mentioned that later the individuals sold five pieces of their land to the temple in order to clear their debt. The temples generously lend money, at times even selling their landed properties, to the villagers to carryout repairs in the irrigational facilities. Such support to the agrarian community by the medieval temples, were regarded high as it helped to increase the agricultural produce and fiscal benefits. An inscription from Tiruppanangadu, dated 1381 A.D, issued in the reign of Viruppana-Udaiyar records that when the village tank breached and no funds were available for the repair, the temple authorities helped the villagers, by selling a portion of the temple land and utilizing the proceeds for repairing the breach in the tank.^[58]

Sometimes the village assembly mortgaged the jewels of the God from the temple in order to pay the default land dues and later conveyed lands to the temple.^[59] Instances shows that the village assembly, at times, borrowed money from the temple in order to pay the land tax defaulted by them. A Sevalur inscription dated 1503 A.D in the reign of Danmayara Maharaya records a sale of land by the *urars* of Tenur to the temple of Tiru-Bhumisvaramudaiya-Nayanar of Sevalur for 300 *sakkaram-panam* which they had originally borrowed from the temple treasury to pay the king's dues.^[60] A sixteenth century epigraph from Tiruvarangulam, Pudukkottai, records the loan lent by the temple treasury to the Vellala tenants and the owners of *padikaval* right in three villages of Palaikkudi, Kalangudi and Kilinallur for clearing up certain dues demanded by the chief Svami Narasa Nayakkar.^[61] Later, when the villagers and the owners of *padikaval* rights were not able to pay back the money they had borrowed from the temple treasury, they sold away some of their lands to the temple.

VI. CONCLUSION

With the power of land, the temples carried out some useful developmental activities to the society either directly or indirectly in the agricultural front. The predominant activities involved in reclamation of virgin lands or the uncultivated lands and providing irrigational facilities to the cultivable lands. Such activities of the temples not only helped in the expansion of agriculture but also in augmenting the extra income. Generally the donated lands to the temples were distributed to tenancy or cultivated directly by temple under the supervision of its administrators. The reason being the lands and villages granted to the temples were scattered in a vast stretch of lands, naturally these lands had to be cultivated through tenants. Temples, as landowners, offered immunity to the cultivators of the temple lands, lent money to the cultivators, reduced their upper share (*melvaram*) and even remitted the dues in favour of the cultivators. The above select epigraphs give a striking fact that the medieval temples helped the agrarian society, particularly, during their hard times. Though the temples lent the money to the assemblies and individuals on interest basis their fiscal help to the society to be viewed as very special in terms of socio-economic aspect of the agrarian society.

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