



MERITORIOUS SERVICES OF SOMANATHAR TEMPLE TO THE MEDIEVAL SOCIETY OF ATTUR IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describes Meritorious Services of Somanathar Temple to the Medieval Society of Attur in Thoothukudi District. In the medieval days temples performed multifarious activities in and around of their precincts. They extended their helping hands in various ways to the local people and promoted the preservation of the various arts of the day. They not only catered to the physical needs of the people but also to their mental and spiritual elevation. While the upper castes had a greater say in the spiritual and educational matters, the lower castes had their role in manual labour. Yet, all people united in promoting and preserving the traditions from turning extinct. The temple had a major share as court of justice, centre of learning, library, art and culture, public record office, employer, consumer, bank and feeding centre.

KEYWORDS : judicial enquiry, Vedas and puranas, library

Introduction:

In the medieval days temples performed multifarious activities in and around of their precincts. They extended their helping hands in various ways to the local people and promoted the preservation of the various arts of the day. They not only catered to the physical needs of the people but also to their mental and spiritual elevation. While the upper castes had a greater say in the spiritual and educational matters, the lower castes had their role in manual labour.

The Attur temple served as the venue of the court of justice. The temple was the sanctified, preserved and conscience keeper of the people. They had never dared enough to speak untruth or do an evil deed in the temple precincts for fear of punishment. They gathered there to settle many of their disputes. As a result, meetings were held in the *mandapa* of the temple to discuss various matters.¹

Investigations connected in the *tirumandapam* are referred to in inscription.² The learned people who were experts in dharmasastras heard cases. They were known as Dharmasanabhattas.³ In addition, the priests of the temple also tried certain cases in co-operation with village assemblies.⁴

According to the record, the dispute was adjudicated by a tribunal composed of members of the *nadu*, *samayamantrics* (royal priests) and different priests. In certain cases the trustees of the temple acted as judges.⁵ The temple *Sthanattars* and *Maheswaras* too participated in investigations and deliberations of cases which were later decided by the assembly.⁶

In judicial enquiry, public opinion was sought for.⁷ A typical form is the invitation extended to the pilgrims and people of various places to participate in the deliberations. An inscription⁸ of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I mentions that their judgement was impartial.

The award of any punishment was only after detailed deliberations and the punishment was in tune with the gravity of the mistake committed. The joint sittings of village heads (assemblies), temple authorities and priests were held to discuss important matters affecting temple administration. Several records point out to such joint sittings of the above members of various bodies.⁹

After a careful hearing and verification of documents and other evidences, the dispute was settled. The assembly which decided the case consisted of the *Mahesvaras*, the *Sathanattars*, the *pilgrims*, the *kaikkolas* and *kaikkolamudalis*. Another record¹⁰ of the same king registers a dispute between the *chettis* and *vaniyanagarattars* regarding the conduct of a festival in the temple. The *Chettis* were enjoying the right of conducting festivals. But the *Vaniyanagarattars* were not pleased with this arrangement and quarreled with the

Chettis. To settle this dispute the , temple authority decided to sell the right in public auction. They found that this was the only proper way in solving the problem.¹¹

Thefts in temple were also detected and punished by the village assembly and the temple authority. When the jewels belonging to the temple of *Someswarar* found missing the *maheswaras* and other temple authorities met in the *tirumandapa* for investigation.¹² At last the culprits were traced and punished. In property disputes there existed the practice of verifying the original documents.¹³

To detect minor crimes and make the thieves confer their crimes, they were made to undergo the ordeal of handling a red hot ploughshare. This is a traditional form of judicial probe in detecting crimes. The offenders were severely punished and punishments were based purely on the nature of their crimes.

Centre of Learning

An inscription¹⁴ of A.D 1289 of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya III records the prevalence of the *vyakhyana mandapa* in the Attur temple, where discussions were held. The recitation of sacred hymns was considered an educational qualification for the Brahmin priests. Several records register the step taken by the rulers and the ruled for the recitation of different hymns in the temple. A record of the temple registers the employment of eleven persons by Maravarman Sundara Pandya II to recite *Tirujnanam*.¹⁵

Besides these, provisions were made for the recitation of *Vedas* and *puranas*.¹⁶ Encouragement was given to the recitation of such hymns by giving lands and food. A record of Virapandya of A.D 954 mentions a gift of land to meet the expenses of feeding some Brahmanas chanted certain portions of Vedas in the temple. Jatavarman Sundara Pandya¹⁷ I ordered that the land in the eastern hamlet of Attur Chaturvedi Mangalam be made completely tax-free for the recital of *vedas* and *puranas*.

Another record¹⁸ of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya registers a gift of 1000 kuli of rent free land for the maintenance of two Brahmins who recited Vedas. The elaborate arrangement made for the recitation and exposition of the sacred texts in the temple helped the people to learn the texts for themselves.

This served as a kind of informal education. In this way, the Attur temple played a major role in transmitting educational principles.¹⁹ The symbolic representations of mythological stories in paintings and sculptures in the temple served as visual aids to the uneducated.²⁰

The establishment of Vedic school at Attur²¹ records the patronage given by the temple for learning. Facilities were given to the

students to stay and study. In the Vedic school of Attur, teachers were appointed to teach *Vedas*, *Vyagaranas* (grammar) and philosophy.²² Brahmin *brahamacharis* were alone imparted education in this educational centre.²³ Land was set apart to meet the expenses of the students attached to the temple.²⁴

The matha or seminary attached to the Someswara temple was also the centre of higher learning. It provided systematic training in the sacred lore. Its members were dedicated themselves for the spiritual knowledge.²⁵ A record²⁶ of Virapandya dated A.D 957 registers a gift of 20 sheep for the maintenance of a *matha*. In this *matha* discussions and discourses on different spiritual themes were conducted.

Tirujnanam, a work of the Saiva Siddhanta School was recited.²⁷ A record²⁸ of Sundara Pandya refers to the appointment of eleven persons drawn from various *mathas* in South India for reciting *Tirujnanam* in this temple.

Akin to the *matha*, the *agraharam*, the Brahmin settlement, also imparted higher learning to the Brahmins in Vedas and other allied subjects. The Brahmin settlement nurtured young scholars in high learning. Inscription²⁹ records their proficiency in different subjects. For instance, a record of Maranjadayana registers a grant of village for some Brahmins who were well-versed in the *shadahas* or the six components of Vedic learning.

In the Vikrama Pandya Chaturvedi Mangalam, 64 Brahmins proficient in Vedas and *sastras*, were made to settle.³⁰ Some *bhattars* in the *agraharas* were known as *Chaturvedi bhattars*³¹ (masters in the four Vedas). These scholars were encouraged by giving tax-free lands, house-sites and even the right of cultivation. Specialists in Vedas were honoured by giving separate *pangu* (share) in the village known as *Yajurveda Vriti* and *Purana Vriti*.

This is revealed by a record³² of Virapandya. These scholars were expected to preach and propagate their knowledge. Chances of high learning were denied to the students of other lower castes. As a result, they groaned and groped under the darkness of superstitions.

Library

The growth of educational systems and values necessitated the maintenance of library for the easy reference of teachers and the taught. Inscription³³ refers to the existence of library in the Attur temple. This library is known as *Saraswati bhandram*. In this library, some twenty scholars proficient in different branches of learning were employed to copy down various *grantas* (books) and *manuscripts*.

A record³⁴ furnishes some information regarding the functioning of the same library. It records the grant of land for the maintenance of several persons employed there. The nature of their work was also referred to in it. Provision was made for writing and comparing works in Sanskrit and Tamil. Among the books, special mention was made of the *puranas*, *Jyothi Sastra* and *Siddhanta-ratnakara* of Someswarar.

Public Record Office

In addition, the temple acted as the record office (archives in the modern sense). Several records found engraved and preserved on the outer walls of the *vimana*, the *mandapa* and *prakara* of the temple prove this. They throw light on the important exploits of the kings, the day to day administration of the kingdom, the economic, social and religious life of the people. The rulers paid due attention to the preservation of these records. Royal orders issued to this effect were communicated to the temple executive.³⁵

According to the royal orders, their deeds and documents were engraved on stone walls and copper plates.³⁶ The documents related to the purchase³⁷ and gift of lands³⁸ to the temple were deposited in

the temple. The records engraved on the walls of the temple were long lasting as they could withstand minor natural calamities. This shows the historical sense of preserving the past by way of engraving in the face of stones of ages.

The nature of relations with the neighbouring countries was also referred to in these records.³⁹ The extensive conquests of the Pandya kings were found inscribed on the walls. Maranjadayana's campaign against Gholanadu Was informed by his inscription.⁴⁰ The records carry different details of taxes levied by the government and other agencies.⁴¹

The administrative arrangements, the duties discharged by various officials and the effective functioning of the village assemblies were also attested to by these records. The inscription⁴² of Maranjadayana gives details about rules and regulations governing the admission of members of the *Sabha*. The socio-religious, politico-economic and cultural conditions of the local people were partially referred to in these inscriptions. When this temple preserved the history of the land, it is not wrong to call it as record office.

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