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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CHOLA TEMPLES: EPICENTRE OF ECONOMIC CONDITION AS GLEANED FROM
GANGAIKONDACHOLAPURAM TEMPLE INSCRIPTIONS**

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Abstract

Temples were not only places of worship or symbols of religious organizational platform for socio economic and cultural well-being. One historian calls it as “*a city of miniature in the medieval period*”. During Chola period, temples moved up from just being place of worship to centre of influence in economic and cultural bandwidth. Temples served as the epicentre of a society and the fulcrum of community building. Cholas utilised temples as a sustainable model for the holistic development of a good community. Temples played a major role in the economic activities and development of the community. Primarily the temples were the biggest land owners by virtue of donations by the Kings and their relatives, senior members of the Kings administration, merchants, merchant guilds and the military. In addition to the above, the reclaimed lands for cultivation were settled directly in the name of the temple or were routed through Brahmins managing the temples. The temples managed their vast land holdings either by direct cultivation by employing managers or by giving lands to tenants on lease. In this paper an attempt is made to throw light on economics activities of Gangaikondacholapuram temple through its inscriptions. The Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram has played an important role as landholder, consumer of goods, employer, banker and the like. The inscriptions which are engraved on the walls of this temple provide a lot of information with regard to the economic condition of the locality.

Key words: Sarvamanya , Devadana, Bhattavritti, Thiruvilaiattam, koyilparivaram)

Introduction

The study of the Hindu temples as economic entities assumes a great prominence in the economic historiography of medieval South India. Burton Steins' work marks an important step towards a new methodology in the analysis of temple inscription and socio-economic setup.¹ The temples were maintained with royal benefaction and public patronage. One can understand the economy of the place from the inscriptions relating to the sale and purchase of the lands, provision of the irrigation facilities, conduct of *Pujas* and festivals, protection of the property of the temples, the upkeep of the temple premises, the construction of the building and several other works. The Brihadisvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram has played an important role as landholder, consumer of goods, employer, banker and the like. The inscriptions which are engraved on the walls of this temple provide a lot of information with regard to the economic condition of the locality.

Temple as a Land Owner

The temple filled a large position in the agricultural economy of the locality as the biggest land-owner. Both royal benefactions and public patronage took the form of land grants. The royal grants were of two kinds: *Sarvamanya* and *Devadana*.² In the first type, the entire village was given to the temple and the second type specified that all taxes payable to the king were to be collected and enjoyed by the temple. In the case of many temples, villages were given as *Devadana*, gifts to the temple. As the king usually gave them tax free, all such income become the privilege of the temple. The temples had to collect all the taxes and perquisites due from those lands. It means that the revenue of the village had to be looked after by the temple. People of Gangaikondacholapuram and surrounding villages made different types of donations to this temple in token of their religious zeal. Informations on such gifts are scattered in several records. An inscription³ of Virarajendra describes the grant of villages as *devadana* by himself and his predecessors. Another inscription⁴ mentions the gift of land for a special service called *Rasakkanayan Sandhi* by the king Vikrama Pandya. Land gifts are mentioned in the two

inscriptions of a chieftain, Thiruvengadamudaiyan Ekambaranatha Gangeyan of Vaipur are recorded in this temple.⁵

Temple as an Employer

The temple was a great sustaining factor in the village. It provided a means of living for a large number of families and fostered many arts and crafts. An examination of inscriptions would reveal the number of men engaged in temple service, their varied functions, and their equipment. The temple priest well versed in the agama ritual was known as *Bhattavritti* and was called *Bhattacharya* or *Sivahacharya* or *Sivabrahmana*.⁶ The manager of the temple who supervised all its affairs was known as *Devakarmi*.⁷ As the *bhoga* and *prasada* in the temple was indented to be distributed after every *yama* worship, there were cooks working in the *Madapalli*, the temple kitchen.

There were various endowments in the temple for the feeding of Pilgrims, Brahmacharins and Brahmins. There is a mention of the number of *Yogis*, *Yogesvaras* and *Bhairavas*. All ascetics were fed and maintained by the temple. To help the Priest in the sanctum, there was a water carrier to bring fresh water from the tank to bathe the deity. There were gardeners to look after the temple garden and garland makers who gathered flowers and provided garlands for daily worship. There were weavers for the supply of fresh cloth for the deity. There was also washer man to give his share of service. There were carpenters for the temple to attend to wood work and the repairs of the temple car, the Palanquin and the *vahanas*. In the service of the temple there were a number of musicians like drummers, pipers, flutists, and lute players. Some of them sounded hand bells or cymbals. There were also conch-blowers and men for sounding the *karadigai*. A dance master was attached to the temple and arrangements were made for musical accompaniments for the daily dance in the evening for which a number of dancing girls were attached to the temple. For the daily recital of the *veda* and the singing of hymns like *Devaram*, *Thiruvaimozhi*, *Thiruppallandu*, *Thiruvembavai* adequate provision was made. *Devaram*, *Thiruvasagam* and *Nalayiradivya prabandam* is hymns in Tamil sung by

Saivaite and *Vaisnavite* saints. Inscription says that this temple maintained teachers and students for the study of different branches of knowledge. The temple was in charge of other charitable institutions attached to it. It had to look after the feeding and maintenance of certain *mathas*.⁸ In brief, the temple provided permanent employment for a good number of people from Gangaikondacholapuram who looked up to this institution for sustenance. In addition, the temple employed several skilled crafts men, like stone masons, chariot makers, wood carvers, painters, *sthapthis*, metal workers, and jewelers. They found employment whenever there was *Thiruppani* or temple repairs, renewals, construction of additions, when a temple car was renewed or remodelled when the walls or ceilings were repainted with scenes from the epics and other religious lore. The temple encouraged several industrial activities. The most important were stone cutting and bronze casting industries. The other industries that flourished under the patronage of the temples were cattle breeding, jewellery, and carpentry and oil trade. The role of merchant gills in supervising the temple affairs, point to their connection with the temple administration.

Temple as a Big Consumer

The temple was the biggest consumer of the locality, as it required a variety of commodities and services for its day-to-day conduct as well as special festive occasions. The temple was the busiest centre in a village. From the early hours of the morning till late in the night, there were a number of persons coming to transact business in the temple apart from the regular pilgrims and devotees. There were shepards attached to this temple who came with the required quantity of ghee at the appointed time daily for the lamps.⁹ Provision for the lighting was made by many endowments for the regular supply of ghee by Rajendra I and his successors. The temple granaries were filled with grains and account rendered by those in charge of cultivation. Inscriptions say there were similar endowments for special *abisekas* (*Annabhiseka*), *archanas* and offerings at specified times in the day. There was a regular supply of sweet smelling sandal paste, rose water, garlands, fruits, vegetables, specially cleaned rice and other requirement according to

specification in the endowment.¹⁰ The epigraphs further says that there were other endowments involving change of money, land and livestock which had to be properly maintain and looked after. All these meant the business transaction of the Gangaikondacholapuram temple.

Temple as Bank

Temple treasuries served as local banks. The temples lend money to private bodies and village assemblies for cultivation, with or without security. Parents in order to perform the marriage of their daughters drew as loan money from the temple treasury. In times of distress temples helped the people and the unrealisable debts were rounded up by the purchase of the debtor's land.¹¹ In critical times the Government did not hesitate to put the temple under the charge of the army. Since Gangaikondacholapuram temple was partially constructed for defense purpose, it was very often controlled by the army.¹²

Temple as a Public Record Office

The temple was a great landlord, in the sense, that it dealt with the distribution of the land for cultivation among the tillers and received the products in return. In Gangaikondacholapuram a separate committee was formed for looking after the properties.¹³ It was not easy to manage property and tackle problems of encroachment etc. A striking force or an armed squad called *Vellaikarars* was placed at their disposal to help them in the discharge of their duties. Generally donations of land made to Siva temple were known as *devadanams*, and to Vishnu temple *Thiruvidaiattam*, to Jain and Buddhist temple *Pallichchandam*, to Brahmins *Brahmadeyam*, *Bhataviruthi* and to astrologers as *Kani muttruttu*. The temple which received such lavish endowments naturally played an important role in the economy of the village. The temple maintained the records of all these transactions. There was a large army of men known as *koyilparivaram* to attend to the various problems related to the maintenance of land, collection of rents, etc.¹⁴ The temple authorities made regulations regarding the sale and mortgage of temple lands. In some cases, conditions were also laid down that these

lands should not be sold as *chandessvara vilai* and in case the lands were misappropriated they were soon confiscated and added to the temple lands.¹⁵

Thus, Brahadiswara temple of Gangaikondacholapuram has become an integral part of social and economic lives of the people. On account of the temple having economic production and irrigational rights, it was in a position to dominate the life of the village. From the discussion, it can be seen that this temple became the centre of people's activities and the temple played a vital role in the growth of socio-economic aspects of their life.

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