



Religious Functionaries, The Pivots Of Temple Management Revealed By Inscriptions

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Abstract

Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, is home to numerous temples that are renowned for their religious significance, and cultural heritage. At present the administration and management of these temples are primarily overseen by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu. This paper explore some of the various religious functionaries and the significant religious administration temples in Tamil Country during the medieval times. This paper connotes that in these temples various categories of artists, servants and workers were appointed to perform religious functions and different kinds of ritualistic services as religious were appointed officials to maintain temple religious ritualistic regular administration of the temple.

Keywords: *pujas, archakar, paricharakas, pandarams, sivabrahmanas, garba graha, Aganalgai, naivedyas, madapalli, abhisheka, manigal, Devaram, chaturveda, Pidaris, oduvars*

The temples afforded opportunities to the mass of various communities of the local region to serve the temple in various capacities involving religious works. The temple, as an institution, provided work for a large number of people. Nearly 600 people were employed in the great temple at Thanjavur during the period of Rajaraja I¹ chola. A record² dated A.D. 1008 of Rajaraja I informs us that there existed twenty one kinds rendered their services in this temple.

The religious servants of the temple can be divided into two kinds: They were religious and quasi-religious.³ Among them the religious functionaries are most important. The members who engaged in religious services like the performance of the *pujas* or worship and chanting the sacred hymns (*mantras*) are popularly known religious workers. The inscriptions in this temple refer to a number of religious officials high and low attached to the temple, which was *archakars*. The archakar officials were responsible for the maintenance of temple regular religious affairs.

Functionaries of the Priests

The temples being spiritual centres, required the services of a host of priestly functionalities. The Priests were employed to conduct ritualistic worship and to perform other related services. The spiritual functionaries, particularly the priests, acted as intermediaries between God and the devotees.⁴ Those who engaged themselves in performing purely the spiritual functions are grouped under the category of spiritual functionaries. Inscriptions made distinct reference to them as *sivabrahmanas aganaigaiyar, archakas, paricharakas, Tirumanjanam edekkiravar and vinnappam seivar*. The *priestly functionaries* were to provide the Gods with the needs of daily life. They were to preserve the sanctity of the temples by carrying out the rites and rituals as referred to in the *agamas*. It is commonly held that they had mastery over the *agamic* prescriptions about worship and the performance of rituals in these temples. Great care was taken by them, when they performed worship. Those, who were to perform the rituals had to prepare themselves before the beginning of ceremonies. Bathing and other acts of purification were necessary for them.

The Brahmins alone were employed to perform the divine service in the *sanctum sanctorum*.⁵ However, in certain temples, non-brahmin priests generically known as *pandarams* were also engaged in performing worship.⁶ The number of priests, who served in temples differed from temple to temple according to its size, income and importance. However small temple is, needs the service of at least one priest. Thus, the priestly class formed an integral part of the temple establishment. As spiritual heads, the priests in those days exercised considerable influence on the spiritual and temporal concerns of the community. They were considered to be the direct representatives of God on earth and are said to possess divine powers. Among the temple functionaries, the priests enjoyed comparatively greater respect, and therefore, they occupied the highest position in the temple hierarchy. Any harm to them was considered irreligious and anti-religious. They were given staff quarters in the *tirumadaivilagam*. Therefore, they enjoyed an enviable status in the society.

The wrong doers were severely punished and at times heavily fined. For instance, a criminal was tied to the leg of a buffalo / bull and dragged for having murdered a Brahmin.⁷ (surrounding streets of the temple) itself. For illustration a record⁸ of

Kulasekhara from Anbil informs us that certain priests like the *nambis* and *sivabrahmanas* resided in such staff quarters. They were kept in the proximity perhaps because, they were frequently needed in performing *pujas* and other related services at fixed intervals. They were assigned lands, given tax concessions and other *privileges*. Selection to the service of Religious Functionaries in the temple was mostly on hereditary basis they became the salaried class of the temple. Appointment to this post was commonly on hereditary grounds. When assignments were made for specific purposes, it is said that the donees and their descendants must do the service, receiving the income set apart for that specific purpose. When qualified persons were not found among their relatives, other competent persons could be appointed to do the assigned work.⁹ It indicates that with certain specific qualifications. When they received remuneration in recognition of their service, they were paid in food grain.

The Sivabrahmanas

They acted as chief priests, conducted worship,¹⁰ supervised ceremonial rituals and looked after other administrative works. Evident that donations were left in the protection of the *sivabrahmanas* as well as the temple treasury. It was the duty of the *sivabrahmanas* to maintain the services. The *sivabrahmanas* were another category of priestly class employed in the Saiva temples. Their name itself suggests their services in Saiva temples. They formed themselves into groups.¹¹ Special offerings and worships were also performed by them. For this purpose,¹² money¹³ gold¹⁴ and kinds were endowed to them. To meet the various offerings, donations were made in the name of the temples. These were left under the protection of this group. On certain occasions, the *sivabrahmanas* could not perform the services regularly with the income from the endowments already made. On such occasions, there existed the practice of giving additional grants to meet the expenses.¹⁵ Sometimes, money was deposited in the temple treasury by the donors for food offerings to the main deity. On such dealings, even if the money was deposited in the treasury of the temple.¹⁶ Thus it is In case of money gift, it appears that they should invest the money by lending out for interest. The interest amount was to be utilized for various services.

The Aganalgaiyar

The priest in charge of the garba graha was called *aganalgaiyar*. In the early ages, the *aganalgaiyar* and *aganalgai*¹⁷ performed spiritual services in the Saiva temples. Later on, this designation was changed probably as *sivabrahmanas*. The reason for such a change is not clearly known. Perhaps this was done to distinguish them from the Vaishnava priests. Livestock like sheep and cows were left under their care and control. They should measure out the specified quantity of ghee to burn lamps.¹⁸ *Aganalgaiyar* also performed certain spiritual functions, such as the lighting of lamps. The term *aganalgai* refers to the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Hence, Generally, Brahmins of Saiva faith, who were proficient in the Vedas and Sastras, were alone employed to perform pujas inside the sanctum sanctorum. This helped them hold an honored place in the hierarchy of temple priests. The various duties discharged by them are attested by several records. They agreed to undertake those different endowments made over to the temples. In another instance, a tenant of the temple, endowed some money to burn a lamp for which, the *aganalgaiyar* agreed to supply the required ghee.¹⁹ It seems that they were in charge of the lamps to be burnt inside the *garba graha*. From these, it becomes evident that the

The Archakas

The officiating priests, who conduct the worship in the inner shrines are called *archakas*²⁰ they were given land property for their maintenance, Any donation made for festival or offerings; special share was allotted to the priests.²¹ Usually in Siva temples *sivabrahmanas* are appointed to these posts. They wash the deities, bedeck the idols and perform pujas. In the earlier period, besides the share of the offerings of the God.²² From the inscriptions we do not get any information regarding the number of priests, who served in the temple in the earlier period. Earlier, they received income from the land property and a regular, share in the daily food offerings.

The Paricharakas

They are the attendants in Religious functionaries, who render assistance to the officiating priests.²³ They do various duties such as cleaning the *garba graha*, bringing the water for abhisheka, lighting, the lamps, preparing the *pujas* articles, assisting in flag in festivals and rendering such other services. They prepare the *naivedyas* in *madapalli* for the *pujas*. The *sivabrahmana brahmacharians* or *manigal alias Paricharakas* are doing these services.

Thirumanjanam - Edukkiravar (carriers of Holy water)

They are the assistants to *archakas*, who carry the holy water for bathing the God in the temple. Only Brahmin assistants probably *manigal*, are doing this service.²⁴

The Thirtipadigam Paduvor

The *Vinnappam seivar* and *araiyar* were the chanters and singers of the Vaishnava temples. The chanters of sacred hymns were considered close servants of God.²⁵ The Saiva and Vaishnava temples had their own singers of Saiva hymns. From the early times, the recitation of religious hymns, both Saiva and Vaishnava, was prominent in the temples. It formed a part of daily worship. The temple authorities constantly encouraged this practice. The *oduvor* were the chanters and performers of the Saiva temples. They reciters of *Devaram* hymns were known as Pidaris.²⁶ The reciters and chanters were great experts in the respective religious texts. The bhattars, who engaged themselves in reciting the *Vedas* and the *puranas*, had mastery over these books. Their mastery over the four Vedas is evident from terms such as chaturveda

bhatters.²⁷ Provision was made for the maintenance of such Religious functionaries persons in the temples. The Kings also took active measures for the recitation of sacred works. For instance, the Kulottunga II Chola made provision for the recitation of hymns in this temple.²⁸ Lavish Endowments were made for the maintenance of these persons. An instance is provided by an inscription of Konerinmeikodan. The record malces mention that an endowment of land was made over to the persons, who were to recite *Vedas* in the temple.²⁹ The reciters were the privileged few among the temple priests. Thus, the reciters were a class of priests, whose meritorious services were recognized by giving an honored place in the hierarchy of temple establishment. *Thirupadigam Paduvor* were temple singers and reciters. They used to sing *Devaram* hymns in front of the deity in a particular musical note. Music is closely associated with song, dance expression. The sacred hymns were considered as sacred music. In the temples, the hymns of *Nayanmars* and *Alwars* were sung systematically. The hymns induced the people. Almost all the temples possessed beautiful sculptures of musicians with their instruments. Music had great appeal among the people. For illustration an inscription³⁰ dated A.D. 1135 of Kulottunga I Chola that there was a troupe of 16 blind persons as *Thirupadigam Paduvor* in this temple. The musicians of temple were called *pidaris* in the Cholas period. At present they are called *oduvars*. Besides *Devaram*, *Vedas* were also chanted in this temple at the time of worship. This is also known from the epigraph³¹ of Konerinmeikondan that 24 learned Brahmanas in the *Sastras*, were appointed for reciting the *Vedas* in this temple.

The Priests of the temples principal the religious functionaries in temple of country Tamil Nadu who perform various rituals and ceremonies. They are responsible for conducting daily pujas (worships), performing abhishekas (ritual bathing of the deity), and offering prasadam (sacred food) to the devotees. These priests are usually well-versed in the religious scriptures and rituals associated with the temple. Among the priests the Archakas are the main priests, who perform the religious rituals and ceremonies in the temples. They are considered the pivots of the temple ceremonies and its traditions. Archakas undergo rigorous training to learn the mantras rituals and associated with the specific temple they serve. The Sthanikars are temple employees, who assist the priests in performing various duties. They help in the maintenance of the temple, cleaning the premises, and organizing the daily rituals. Sthanikars play a crucial role in ensuring the smooth ritual and religious functioning of the temple. The temples have elaborate rituals and ceremonies performed by numerous priests. These temples, religious functionaries and contries others in Tamil played a significant role in the religious and cultural fabric during the medieval times. They attract devotees, scholars, and art enthusiasts, who come to admire their architectural splendor, participate in rituals, and seek spiritual solace

In Hindu temples, priests, also known as Acharyas or Pujaris, play a vital role in conducting rituals, offering prayers, and performing various religious ceremonies. They are well-versed in the religious scriptures, rituals, and practices associated with the specific temple or deity. Archakas are priests, who perform religious services in temples. They conduct daily poojas (rituals), offer prayers, and maintain the sanctity of the temple premises. Kurukkal is a term used to refer to Hindu priests in Tamil Nadu, particularly among the Saivite (followers of Lord Shiva) community. They are responsible for performing rituals, conducting ceremonies, and leading religious activities in temples and households.

Adheenams are religious institutions or mutts associated with the Saivite sect of Hinduism. The heads of these institutions, called Adheenam heads, serve as spiritual leaders and guide the followers in matters of religious practices, rituals, and philosophical teachings. Gurukkals are priests who specialize in performing rituals and ceremonies from Tamil Brahmin households. They are knowledgeable in Vedic rituals and recitations and carry out religious ceremonies for important occasions such as weddings, births, and other family events. Aachariyars are religious teachers and scholars who possess extensive knowledge of Tamil literature, philosophy, and religious texts. They provide religious guidance, conduct discourses, and disseminate spiritual teachings among the Tamil community.

In the Tamil folk tradition, an Ammanar is a person believed to be possessed by a deity, usually a goddess. They are consulted for spiritual advice, and their role involves divination, healing, and performing rituals to appease the deity. Bhagavathar is a title given to individuals, who specialize in singing devotional songs, particularly in the context of Bhagavatham, a sacred text of Lord Vishnu's incarnations. They are often invited to temples or homes to perform devotional music and narrate the stories of deities. The Pandits Vedic scholars, also known as Pandits, are experts in the Vedic scriptures and recitations. They play a significant role in performing Vedic rituals, chanting sacred mantras, and conducting ceremonies associated with Hindu traditions. Archakarars are temple priests in Tamil Nadu who carry out religious rituals and ceremonies in accordance with the specific customs and practices of the temple. They are responsible for the daily worship, administration, and maintenance of the temple premises.

Religious functionaries, such as priests have various powers and functions depending on their specific religious traditions and roles within their respective communities. While the specific responsibilities and authorities may differ, the following are some general powers and functions often associated with religious functionaries. Religious functionaries serve as spiritual leaders and guides within their religious communities. They provide religious teachings, interpretations, and guidance on matters of faith, morality, and spirituality. They officiate and lead religious ceremonies, rituals, and worship services. This can include conducting religious ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and other religious rites.

Religious functionaries often play a significant role in religious education. They may lead religious classes, sermons, or lectures, instructing the community students in matters of religious doctrine, scripture, and ethics. Religious functionaries

foster, organize and facilitate community events, religious festivals, and social gatherings that promote religious significance and traditions. Religious functionaries often provide moral and ethical guidance to their followers, emphasizing virtues, values, and principles prescribed by their respective religious traditions. They may address social issues, advocate for justice, and promote moral conduct within society.

Depending on the religious organization's structure, religious functionaries may be involved in administrative and governance tasks. This can include overseeing the functioning of religious institutions, managing finances, and making decisions regarding the religious and ritualistic affairs. Depending on the religious tradition, religious functionaries may have the authority to administer sacraments or perform specific rituals that are considered sacred within their faith. Religious functionaries have the authority to offer blessings and lead prayers. They may bless individuals, homes, objects, or special occasions, providing spiritual support and invoking divine favor or protection. Religious functionaries often play a role in preserving religious traditions and maintaining orthodoxy within their faith communities. They may interpret and uphold religious doctrines, rituals, and practices to ensure adherence to the teachings and customs of their respective religious traditions.

In some religious traditions, religious functionaries may possess the authority to perform spiritual healing or exorcism rituals. They may offer prayers, rituals, or blessings to alleviate spiritual afflictions or address perceived spiritual disturbances. Religious functionaries are responsible for conducting and presiding over various religious ceremonies and rituals. This can include leading prayer services, performing religious rites of passage, leading religious processions, or administering sacraments. Religious functionaries are often responsible for promoting and spreading their religious faith. They engage in activities such as preaching, sharing the beliefs, values, and religious significance with others. Religious functionaries serve as moral and spiritual guides, offering advice, wisdom, and guidance on ethical dilemmas, personal struggles, and spiritual significance. They may provide Bhakti, helping individuals navigate challenges and align their lives with religious teachings.

Religious functionaries may perform symbolic actions or represent their religious communities in specific rituals or ceremonies. This can involve wearing religious attire, performing symbolic gestures, or embodying sacred roles within the religious tradition. In certain religious traditions, religious functionaries are seen as intermediaries between the divine and the human realm. They may conduct rituals, prayers, or ceremonies on behalf of their community members, seeking blessings, forgiveness, or spiritual guidance from the divine. Religious functionaries often play a role in upholding ritual purity and observance of religious practices. They may provide guidance on adhering to prescribed rituals, codes of conduct, dietary restrictions, or other practices that are considered essential within their religious traditions. Some religious functionaries are responsible for interpreting and enforcing religious codes and disciplinary measures within their communities. They may provide guidance on matters of religious ethics, moral conduct, and adherence to religious rules and regulations.

Religious functionaries often contribute to the preservation and promotion of their religious and cultural heritage. They may engage in activities such as documenting religious traditions, safeguarding sacred sites, or promoting cultural practices associated with their faith. Religious functionaries often perform symbolic acts and assume ceremonial roles during religious rituals and events. These actions may include blessings of Gods, anointing, consecration, or other symbolic gestures that hold deep religious significance. Religious functionaries often guide and facilitate spiritual experiences for individuals within their religion. This can include leading meditation sessions, retreats, or spiritual practices aimed at deepening one's connection with the divine or attaining spiritual enlightenment. Religious functionaries often play a central role in organizing and leading celebrations of religious festivals and holidays. They oversee the planning, coordination, and conduct of ceremonies, rituals, and events associated with these occasions.

The concluding part states that religious functionaries often work towards fostering social harmony and cohesion within their religious faiths. They may encourage intergenerational cooperation, promote inclusivity, and address issues of social justice and inequality. Conducting Pilgrimages and Sacred Journeys: Religious functionaries may lead or accompany their community members on pilgrimages or sacred journeys to important religious sites or destinations. They provide spiritual guidance, perform rituals, and facilitate the religious significance of these journeys.

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