



Quasi-Religious Functionaries Of Temples Gleaned By Epigraphs

Ms. G. Chitra^{1*}, Dr. R. Nandhini²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part Time) External, Dept. of History, Annamalai University.

²Assistant Professor, Department of History M.V. Muthiah Govt. Arts College, Dindigul.

***Corresponding Author:** Ms. G. Chitra

*Ph.D. Research Scholar (Part Time) External, Dept. of History, Annamalai University.

Abstract

Tamil temples are known for their exciting and elaborate festivals, which are celebrated with great enthusiasm. During these festivals, the temple comes alive with colorful decorations, music, dance, processions, and special rituals. Tamil temples are esteemed as pilgrimage centers, appealing devotees from different parts of the region and beyond. The spiritual staff guarantees that the needs of pilgrims are met, and they receive spiritual guidance during their visit. This paper throws light on performing daily routine pujas, rituals the quasi-religious functionaries played a crucial role in organizing and conducting these festivities to honor the deities and engage the devotees.

Key words: naivedyam, devadanas, Singanmurai, Amudu padaippor, Thiruvilakku and Udaiyar Thachchas.

Introduction

A few temples may also have educational institutions or Gurukulas accompanying with them, where students receive traditional education, including Vedic studies, scriptures, and other aspects of Hindu philosophy. In modern times, some temples actively participate in interfaith dialogues and community outreach programs to promote religious harmony and understanding among people of different faiths. Tamil temples have historically been centres for preserving and promoting various art forms, including classical music, dance, sculpture, and painting.

The spiritual staffs often play a role in encouraging and supporting these artistic endeavours. Tamil temples often encourage devotees to participate in *seva*, or selfless service, to the temple and its community.

Seva might involve assisting in daily tasks, volunteering during festivals, or contributing skills and resources for the temple's betterment. In certain temples, goshalas are established to provide shelter and care for cows, which are considered sacred animals in Hinduism. These shelters emphasize the importance of animal welfare and sustainable practices. Temples may promote eco-friendly practices within their premises, such as reducing plastic usage, waste management, and planting trees, aligning with the principles of environmental consciousness in Hinduism. Efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment within the temple community and associated activities are gaining momentum.

Tamil Temple Spiritual Services

Among the Spiritual Staff or Religious Functionaries along with the quasi-religious workers and their services were also the important elements in the temples ritualistic performance of medieval Tamil Country. In this connection the quasi-religious functionaries and their services were also responsible for performing daily rituals, conducting *puja* (worship ceremonies), and offering prayers to the deities. The quasi-religious functionaries along with priest's knowledge of scriptures and rituals is crucial in maintaining the sanctity of the temple. Along with the Temple Administrator quasi-religious functionaries are also responsible for the overall routine maintenance and performance of the temple ritualistic services. They also oversee the religious services maintain ritualistic routine work and coordinate various ritual activities and ceremonial events along with temple administrators.

Deity Attendants, the Paricharakas

Deity Attendants, the Paricharakas are individuals quasi-religious Functionaries, who were essential and responsible for attending to the daily needs of the performance of ritualistic ceremonial functions. Their essential performances were dressing the deities, offering food *naivedyam*, and ensuring the sanctum sanctorum is well-maintained.

Musicians and Singers

Music and chanting are an integral part of Tamil temple rituals. Musicians and singers the quasi-religious Functionaries (Nadaswaram and vocalists) play an essential role in creating a devotional atmosphere during ceremonies and festivals. ¹

Dance Performers

In some temples, traditional dance performances, such as Bharatanatyam or other classical dance forms, are offered to the deities as a form of worship. These performers are often associated with specific temples for generations.

Astrologer

Some temples have astrologers, who offer astrological consultations and guidance to devotees. They might also be consulted for auspicious dates for temple events and ceremonies.

Temple Elephant, Gajapriya

In some larger temples, you may find a temple elephant that plays a ceremonial role during special occasions and festivals. These elephants are considered sacred and are part of the temple's cultural heritage.

Temple Volunteers, the Sevaks

Many Tamil temples rely on the selfless service of volunteers, known as Sevaks, who assist in various tasks within the temple premises. These volunteers might help with cleaning, organizing events, guiding visitors, and other activities that contribute to the smooth functioning of the temple.

Temple Architects, the Sthapatis

In the case of constructing new temples or renovating existing ones, skilled temple architects, known as *Sthapatis*, are consulted to ensure that the temple adheres to the traditional architectural principles and sacred geometry.

Priest Assistants, Shishyas

Experienced priests might have young apprentices or priest assistants (Shishyas) who are undergoing training to learn the rituals, prayers, and temple practices. This tradition helps pass down the knowledge and expertise from one generation to the next.

The temple, as an institution, provided services for a large number of local people. In this connection the temples afforded service opportunities to the local people of various communities of the region to serve the temple in various capacities. In order to maintain ritualistic services of the temple various categories of workers were appointed to conduct religious functions and different kinds of temple servants were appointed to supervise religious rituals of the temple.

These religious workers of the temple can be divided into two sub divisions. They were religious and quasi-religious servants.² They are as follows.

1. The members engaged in conducting ritualistic services, the performance of the *nithya pujas* or *daily* worship and chanting the sacred hymns, the *mantras* are known as religious servants.
2. The members rendering various other kinds of co-religious, ritualistic assistances and other manual works in conducting regular ritual services are called as quasi-religious functionaries or co-religious staff.

Among the services, the quasi-religious functionaries of temples also regarded as an important workers of the temples. A record mentioned that nearly 600 people were employed in the great temple at Thanjavur during the period of Rajaraja I Chola³. A record⁴ dated A.D. 1008 of Rajaraja I Chola informs us that there existed twenty one workers serving in this temple.

Quasi-Religious Functionaries

Besides the spiritual service staff, there were numerous employees rendering various kinds of Quasi-religious services or co-religious works and rendered other manual assistance for the religious and non-religious management of temple.

The Swayampakis, the Cooks or Amudupadaippors

There is a kitchen or *madappalli* in this temple to prepare various kinds of food to be offered to the deities and temple servants of particular temples. On festive occasions, the cooks have to prepare special kinds of foods to conduct various pujas and the devotees. The cook-cum-food distributors of the temple are called *Amudu padaippor*⁵ For illustration an inscriptions speak about the donations made for *Amudupadiyal* to the main deities of this temples.

The Singan-murai or the viragiduvan, the Suppliers of Fuel

Fuel is needed for cooking food. The fuel may be either fire wood or charcoal. Therefore the person, who supplies the fuel to the kitchen is called *Singanmurai* or *Viragiduvan*⁶ The fuel is referred to as *Erikarumbu* in the epigraphs.⁷ Since the fuel has been provided to *madappalli* of this temple still now.

The Thirupadam Tangubavar or the Sri Padam Tangiravar

Processions deities carries known as the Thirupadam Tangubavar or the Sri Padam Tangiravar served in this temples. Refers to the members, who carry the processional deities around the temple premises. As this was an occasional service, there were no permanent⁸ employees for this purpose.⁹

Thiruvilakku Udaiyar

During the procession of the *Urchava, Murthi* there were a number of torch bearers known as *Thiruvilakku Udaiyar*¹⁰ both inside and outside the temple. *Thiruvijakkukaran*¹¹ was in charge of the holding and lighting lights in the temple and his duty was to light the lamps at nights. For maintaining lights in the temple of Thiruvathikai, tax free gift of land

*Uram' Thiruvilakkup*¹² was given to the temple. It is known from the record¹³ of Kadava Kopperunjinga II issued in his 4th regnal year (A.D. 1247).

The Sculptors the Silpis

The sculptors were an important class of artisans. They were well-trained and steeped in the architectural traditions also and texts. It was a hereditary family profession. The structural additions, alterations and repairs were carried out by them. The sculptors were not permanent employees now days formerly they had been employed regularly. Endowments of lands were also given to sculptors in recognition of their service. For instance a record¹⁴ of Parantaka I Chola refers, to the mason as Naranan Vengadan¹⁵ alias Achariyan of Arukur, who built the temple. Another inscriptions¹⁶ also refer that it is known that additional buildings namely the *mandapa*¹⁷ and the *mukhamandapa* were constructed and the occasional repairs for the temple were carried out then and there.

The Carpenters, the Thachchas

There were also carpenters known as *Thachchas*¹⁸ to attend to various duties like making and repairing the temple *Vahanas* and temple car, whenever required. This class of people is mentioned in the inscription of this temple. The carpenters were given lands named as *Tacha-maniam*.¹⁹

The Blacksmiths, The Karumars

The record²⁰ Srirangadeva Maharaya dated A.D. 1632-33 refers to this class of artisans as *karumars*²¹. Their services were also needed for the preparation and maintenance of vehicle or *vahanas* of God with their vast network of bolts and nails.

The Goldsmith, The Por kollas

The gold smiths are called the *Por kollas*. In the inscription of the temples, there is no direct reference to this class of people. Any how we can presume that their service is valuable to that temple. We get the information from the inscriptions²² that there were many endowments of costly metals namely gold and other precious stone jewels to the deity's v12 bracelets, *Tirunerrippattam*, *Tirutodu*, *Tiruvaram*, *Tirukkarsari* and *Tirukkaisari*. To make such jewel a new and polish the old ones from time to time, the temple required the service of these people. For an illustration an epigraph²³ dated 4th regnal year of Kulottungu I Chola²⁴ mentions that an officer inspected the temple jewels in the presence of certain members of the assemblies and officers of the temple and melted them and made certain new ornaments for the God²⁵.

Bronze and bell;metal worker, The Thattas

The metal workers called *Thattans* are another important class of artisans, who made a number of bronze idols for the temples.²⁶ They were the regular employees and received annual remuneration in kind or cash. They also prepared lamps, lamp stands, bells and gongs in the temple used during the religious rituals and festive occasions. We know from the inscriptions that this temple received the donation of a variety of brass lamp stands.²⁷

The Potters and The Washermen

The Potters, the *Kusavas* and washermen, the *Iraikollis* also played an important role in the temple service. The former supplied the necessary cooking vessels pots for keeping grains, cereals and vessels for keeping things of pujas. The later cleaned the garments of the deities. They did their works regularly as the temple employees.²⁸

The Garden Keepers the Garland Makers and Gardeners

Maintenance of gardens and supply of garlands and flowers to the temple was considered as a sacred duty. Lands were granted particularly for rearing flower gardens for the supply of flowers to the temple. For illustration a record²⁹ of Rajendra I Chola refers to the gift of land for the maintenance of *Champaka* flower gardens. Two gardeners of Abhimanatannasan garden and a servant are mentioned in the records³⁰ Virarajendra, Chola employed in the temple flower garden.³¹ For illustration an inscription (Tamil) found on the west wall of the kitchen in the Tiruvirattaneśvara temple Rajakesarivarman alias Kulottunga Choladeva begins with the historical introduction Pugalmádu vilanga etc., Kulottunga I Chola in his 45th regnal year (A.D. 1115.) records **gift of 2,000 kuli of land**, by purchase, by Araiyan Maduramapikkam, headman of Arumbakkam, in Manavil nadu in Jayangondachola mandalam, for rearing a flower garden called Parudimanikkan Tirunandavana to the God Tiruvirattānam udaiyar in Adhiraja mangalyapuram in Anmūrñadu, alias of Tirumupaipadi, a district of Gangaikondachola mandalam and also for the maintenance of two gardeners and watchmen for it.

Tirualagu, Tirumelugiduvar, The Temple Cleaners

They were the temple cleaners. We know from an inscription that they were known as *Tirualagu*³³ and *Tirumeugiduvar*.³⁴ Mostly women were appointed for this service. They were given remuneration either as kind or cash paid.

Part time workers

In addition to permanent employees, many servants were hired by the temple on temporarily or on part time basis. These non-permanent temple servants formed a group of their own capacities and their functions and conditions of the various groups of quasi-religious employees. The inscriptions of the temples also refer to a gift of land to number of servants high

and low attached to the temple, which was known as *devadanas*. These administration officials were responsible regular and systematic for the management of temple affairs.

The concluding part reveals that it is essential to recognize that Tamil temples are not just religious centers but also hubs of cultural, social, and spiritual activities within their respective communities. The spiritual staff members along with quasi-religious functionaries and volunteers work together to create an atmosphere of reverence and devotion, ensuring that the temple remains a source of solace, inspiration, and community bonding for all devotees. Moreover, the roles mentioned above might not be exhaustive, as the specific structure and staffing of Tamil temples can vary based on their size, tradition, and historical significance. Nevertheless, the collective efforts of these spiritual staff members along with quasi-religious functionaries, volunteers, and devotees contribute to the vibrancy and continuity of Tamil temple spirituality. Tamil temples often collaborate with one another to organize joint events, festivals, and cultural activities. Such cooperation fosters unity among different temple communities and promotes a sense of shared spirituality.

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