

Select Copper-Plate Inscriptions of Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple, Tiruvannamalai - A Layman's Perspective

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ASH-2024-12017622

Volume: 12

Issue: 1

Month: July

Year: 2024

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Received: 26.04.2024

Accepted: 10.06.2024

Published: 01.07.2024

Citation:
Nithya, S. "Select Copper-Plate Inscriptions of Sri Arunachaleswarar Temple, Tiruvannamalai - A Layman's Perspective." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2024, pp. 60-64.

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12i1.7622>



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Abstract

Sri Arunachaleswarar temple at Tiruvannamalai is one of the Pancha Bhuta sthalas or the five abodes of Lord Siva each representing one of the five elements of nature. Arunachaleswarar is the Agni lingam representing the fire element of nature. The temple is located at the foothills of the mountain Arunacala/Annamalai which itself is considered as the 'Tejo-linga', the aniconic form of Lord Siva. The bustling temple town is well known for the famous Kartikai dipam festival and the giripradakṣina (circumambulation of the hill) during the full-moon days. The administrative structure, variety of taxes collected, public works and relief measures undertaken by the temple are all registered in the inscriptions. In addition to the inscriptions on the walls of the temple there are eight copper-plate inscriptions out of which four are in the possession of the temple dēvasthānam. This paper is an attempt to understand the contents in these four copper-plate inscriptions from a layman's point of view.

Keywords: Arunachaleswarar, Giripradaksina, Devasthanam

Introduction

In India, construction of temples has evolved through centuries from the rock-cut shrines to the most sophisticated huge temples of granite bearing innumerable sculptures. Some of the temples stand as an example not only for the artisan's meticulous craftsmanship but also for the economic prosperity of the region. The role of such magnificent temples in the society was not merely restricted to the religious sphere. Temples served as powerful economic institutions next to the 'state' with a lot of endowments especially in the form of land grants and gold. These endowments were utilized by the temples to spearhead various economic activities and boost the local economy in times of need.

Temple and the Hill

Sri Arunachaleswarar temple at Tiruvannamalai is one of the Pancha Bhuta sthalas or the five abodes of Lord Siva each representing one of the five elements of nature. Arunachaleswarar is the Agni lingam representing the fire element of nature. The temple is located at the foothills of the mountain Arunacala/Annamalai (2668 feet high). This hill has several caves, fresh water springs and tanks. The hill itself is considered as Agni-linga/ 'Tejo-linga', the aniconic form of Lord Siva and so the giripradakṣina (circumambulation of the hill) is being done by the people throughout the year though the same on the full-moon days and in the month of Kartikai is considered very auspicious. The giripradakṣina route is about 13 km (around 8 miles) and is studded with many small shrines and matams on it.

The bustling temple town is well known for the famous *Karttikai dipam* festival celebrated to commemorate puranic story of god *Siva* appearing as a column of fire in front of Lord *Visnu* and Lord *Brahma* to settle their dispute for supremacy. This festival is celebrated for ten days ending with the lighting of a light beacon on the top of *Tiruvannamalai* hill. The sculptural representation of this story is shown as *Lingodbhava murti* on the *kosta* behind the sanctum sanctorum of most of the *Siva* temples. From the inscriptions of the temple it is understood that the temple administration was mainly carried out by *danattar* (trustees of the temple) with assistance from *koyil kanakkar* handling the accounts, *kankani* (superintendent), *devakanmigal* (a class of priests). Several others like *manradi* (the shepherds), *kaikola* (the weavers), *nagarattar* (the traders) held responsible positions in the temple administration.

Inscriptions

The temple has grown to the present size by the periodic renovations and construction activities by different rulers who ruled the region over different periods of time. The inscriptions found in this temple help us to ascertain the antiquity of different portions of the temple. For instance, the walls of the Garbagriha contain inscriptions of the Chola kings Parantaka I and Aditya I. Similarly, on the south wall of the first prakara an inscription carries the date corresponding to CE 1030 i.e the rule of Rajendra I and in the same place another inscription mentions about a donation made to lamps around the *Srivimana* of the temple at night time. Prof. T. Ramaswamy suggests that these two inscriptions bring to light the completion of first *prakara* and *vimana* by CE 1031 under the rule of Rajendra I (Ramaswamy).

The temple walls are studded with numerous inscriptions which bear abundant information ranging from political agreements to social welfare; from land grants to taxes; from public works to festivals and the like. Even the layman was entrusted with a duty to be performed for the main deity of the temple like working as a farmer in the temple land, maintaining the cattle of the temple, maintaining the tanks¹ and other water resources entrusted to the

temple and so on. Thus every person of the society had a hand in the service of the temple. Apart from the information about the taxes and levies, the public works and relief measures undertaken by the temples are also registered in the inscriptions. There are eight copper-plate inscriptions dedicated to this temple out of which four are in the possession of the temple *devasthanam*. These four copper-plate inscriptions contain information about the varied communities involved in the charity work and the nature of the endowments entrusted to them.

Apart from the royalty common people like the traders, dancers, shepherds and farmers have also contributed to the services of the deities in the temple. Speaking of the trading community, there were different groups of them like the *nanadesi*, *ainnuravar*, *ayiravar* etc. Every group had their own regulations for the members and some endowments made by such groups were recorded in the inscriptions in the temple walls.

First Copper-Plate Inscription

This inscription is of the year 1692 A.D and contains information about the endowment made by a guild of traders named '*Ayiravar*', a group of a thousand *nagarattars* (traders). The endowment was made for the continuation of the mid-day services to the god *Arunacalesvara* - *svamiyar* and for the charity works done in the *maṭam* established by them. One-thousand *nagarattars* had entrusted this endowment in the hand of Cittilinka paṇṭāram in the form of a copper-plate document. According to this deed, the levies for the sale and purchase of each of these various articles viz., copper, galvanized iron, tin, cattikay, pattiri, incense, medicine, asafoetida, silk-thread, arecanut, pepper, ginned cotton, and cotton were fixed at *panam* 1/20 per poti or load. The makamai (levy) *panam* 1/5 is for a poti each of salt and paddy was also to be utilized for the above endowment.

In addition to this, one *panam* per talaikkattu (head of the family) for the visit of the bridegroom to the house of the bride and vice-versa during the time of their marriage was to be given for the endowment and the same is applicable to all the members of the group.

¹ A tank at Srimahesvaranallur was repaired by Tondaima-Nachiyar, wife of Kangaiyar in 1180 A.D.

This gift of *makamai* (levy) was made to provide for the ablution and offerings during the mid-day service as well as for feeding the Brahmanas, the *Mahesvaras* (ascetics) and for such similar charities in the *maṭam*. It further added that if any one of the *Ayiravar Nagarattar* brought money for performing ablution of the deity, he could give it (to this endowment) for conducting the same during the mid-day service. *Nagarattar* as a community maintained utmost discipline in following the rules of these guilds. Their contributions to this temple are numerous such as providing clarified butter or oil for lighting perpetual lamps in the shrines. When the royalty donated jewellery and gold articles for the deities, the traders donated articles of day-to-day use like the oil for lamps, flowers for the deities, endowments for feeding the poor and similar consistent charity works. The royalty donated for the digging up of tanks whereas it was the common people who made endowments for their maintenance.

Second Copper-Plate Inscription

A copper-plate inscription of the year 1788 A.D mentions about a charity work entrusted to a person named Arunachala naniyar, son of Atekkalan ceṭṭi ṇāniyār who belonged to the Vellala cetti community in the place called Vila ur, a part of Vivarimalai. It is mentioned that during the three festivals in the months of *Karttikai*, *Markali* and *Ani*, the fourth day procession of the deity on *naga vahana* was to be conducted by Arunachala naniyar and for this purpose he could build a *maṭam* (for his stay) in the street through which the procession passed.

In addition to this duty, he had to repair the Sivagangai tank and the enclosure wall of the temple. It must be noted that this order was made hereditary i.e. Arunachala naniyar's descendants had to continue this work. This shows the importance given for the maintenance of the temple tank and wall. A carefully laid out arrangement helped in the periodical repair and renovation works for generations. Similarly, for the procession of the deity (fourth day) during the three important festivals in the year was also made hereditary so that it doesn't get discontinued owing to any financial difficulties.

Third Copper-Plate Inscription

Saint Arunagirinathar, who authored the famous Tiruppugal (on the praise of Lord Murugan) who stayed at Tiruvannamalai temple has a shrine in the temple and there is a copper plate inscription of the year 1790 A.D. mentioning about the charity given for Arunagiriya by all the people of the village Tuvankuriccipttai. From the names mentioned in this inscription, one can understand that people from every community (mudaliyar, cettiya, pillai, acari) were willing to make this charity. The charity deed was to give one *paṇam* per *talaikkattu* (head of the family) for the charity works to be done in the name of Arunagiriya and to be collected every year. It is further mentioned that this endowment was to be continued till the sun and the moon endure.

Fourth Copper-Plate Inscription

This inscription recorded in the year 1791 A.D. is about an endowment made by the residents of Amalattarpettai of Yiluppaiyur region for temple renovation and maintenance works (*tiruppani tarmam*) in Tiruvannamalai temple. They agreed to donate one *panam* of Maturai cakkaram (coin type) per house every year for the temple works to be done periodically in the temple of *Arunacala yicupara cuvamiya* of Tiruvannamalai. Every year the donation will be collected by the naniyar and the witness for this agreement were the koviltallattar named Ponnan, Cenkan and others, Perumal koviltallattar Ponnan and others, Stanapati Renkayan and others ad kotikkalakkara. It is interesting to note that the list of names mentioned in this inscription has some occupational names like cayakkaran, pattunul lokayan, tattar and also different communities like cettis, mudaliyar, pillai are all mentioned showing that every community had made contributions for the temple works.

Observations

A careful study of the above-mentioned four copper-plate inscriptions reveal that these are comparatively shorter than those copper-plate inscriptions made by the kings of those times. All these contain the precise content of the donation, the amount and purpose clearly mentioned without any poetic verses praising any ruler. The main god of the

temple was addressed by the name *Arunacalesvara* - *svamiyar* in these inscriptions. Except the first inscription which is made by 'Ayiravar', a group of *Nagarattar*, the other three inscriptions contain names of different communities and different occupations revealing that every person contributed in one way or the other for temple-related charity works. These inscriptions ascertain that even the commonest person of the society was prosperous enough to make endowments to the temple.

The rulers of those times built huge temples as they perceived temples as a culmination point of all socio-economic-religious, in general, all activities of human well-being. The religious and economic activities of a region were inter-twined and were directly proportionate with each other. For instance, the local economy of the region heavily depended on the religious ceremonies and festivals that were celebrated in the temple. The influx of the pilgrims, their period of stay during the festivities and the resultant trade boosted the local economy. Hence the temples were endowed heavily for the continuation of festivals during different months of a year. During the non-festive occasion also temples spearheaded the economic activity as they had been endowed with large number of agricultural lands, cattle and gold and were the richest institutions next to the state.

In one of the copper-plate inscriptions it is mentioned that a person is entrusted the duty to repair Sivagangai tank of the temple. The water from the temple tanks was utilized for the ablution of the deities and for the preparation of food offerings during times of worship. Hence regular maintenance of the temple tanks becomes quintessential for the religious purpose. On the other hand the construction of new water-bodies like *eri* (tanks), *kulam* (pond), their regular maintenance and repair works were also recorded in the inscriptions. For instance, there is an inscription on the floor of the first *prakara* of this temple about a gift of 20 *kalanju* of gold for the maintenance work of the tank (*eri*) of Puliurnadu-chaturvedimangalam. Periodical maintenance of the tanks were done to provide waters for cultivation and if the persons entrusted with the responsibility were not able to perform their duty owing to age or any other reason the endowment was entrusted to any other eligible persons and this arrangement was

also recorded in the inscriptions. This reveals the importance given to water management, again a task which is a challenge to the present generation. Be it a temple tank or the one for agriculture, the tanks were maintained properly which can be understood from the inscriptions.² This tank building work was the most important one as it initiated a continuous activity of conversion of forests or waste lands into wet cultivable lands, which in turn increased the food-grain production which in turn increased the revenue for the temple/ state resulting in a boost to the local economy. The surplus produce was preserved to be used during unfavorable conditions like wars and natural calamities³.

Conclusion

By the strong influence of the Bhakti movement which somehow shaped up the art and culture of the Tamil country from sixth to the twelfth century A.D, the visionary rulers of the region built several temples that stand as a testimony for the meticulously laid out administrative structure to be followed by the generations to come. Temples were heavily endowed and patronized by the royalty as they served the multi-purpose of social, economic and cultural upliftment of the people. Temples fulfilled the sustainable goals to meet the demands of the then society without disturbing the prospects of the future generation and brought out inclusive growth of the society. From the above copper-plate inscriptions it

2 *This is a very important inscription about an agreement between the temple authorities and eight individuals regarding the lands to be reclaimed in Srimahesvara-nallur. Those lands were brought under cultivation by Arungunrangilan Narppattenayirappillai and his elder sister Mangaiyarkarasiyar who dammed the river Tiruttikkaiyaru by on the borders of Anna-nadu. The water in the tank was utilized for irrigating the lands thus converting them into cultivable lands.*

3 *In the year CE 1202 there was a severe famine in Tiruvannamalai region. The dam and tank construction were done to provide employment for the famine-hit people and they were paid with grains. The severity of the famine was so high that one ulakku (measure of grains) of paddy was sold for one kasu. This construction activity largely helped the people to overcome the famine and poverty. This service was done by Narppattennayirappillai and Mangaiyarkarasiyar, devotees of Arunachaleswarar.*

is clear that people from all walks of life were either donors or benefactors; charity-givers or employees of the temple. The percolation of economic development to every nook and corner of the society was made possible by the temples. From this it can be understood that the rulers of those days were keen in the wholesome development of the society. Under their visionary leadership temples became the richest and powerful economic institutions spearheading the sustainable development and inclusive growth of the society.

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