

Religious Worship in Tamil Nadu During the Kalabra period

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Abstract

The main objective of this research article is to highlight the worship practices during the period referred to as the "Dark Ages" in Tamil history, specifically from the 3rd century CE to the 6th century CE, as well as the significance that Kalabhras attributed to them, supported by relevant Archaeological and Historical Evidences.

This article is based on primary archaeological evidence such as excavations and inscriptions. While literature serves as an important source, it is not possible to write a research paper using it alone as the main evidence. Only a few of the Eighteen Lesser texts assist in the study of this period, with the Naladiyar being a notable example. This clearly indicates that Jainism existed during the Kalabhra period. The presence of Buddhism during the Kalabhra period is evidenced by the text "Abhidhamma Avatara" written by Buddhadatta.

This research paper clarifies that not all Kalabhra kings were opposed to Hinduism; some of them were religiously tolerant. There is no doubt that this paper will serve as a brief explanation for historians and archaeologists.

Key Words

Kalabras, Jainism, Buddhism, Abithaammavadharam, Eighteen Lesser texts, Archaeological Evidences.

Introduction

Understanding the religions present in Tamil Nadu from the 3rd century AD to the 6th century AD, during the rule of the Kalabhras, is somewhat difficult. This is because there is very limited archaeological evidence, especially written records, available about the Kalabhras and their reign. Consequently, researchers refer to the Kalabhra period as the "Dark Age."

The Kalabhras, referred to as "Kali Kings," are said by historians to have supported only Jainism and Buddhism, neglecting Shaivism and Vaishnavism. However, due to insufficient historical and archaeological evidence, it is not fully acceptable to agree with the claim that the Kalabhras disregarded these religions.

During the Kalabhra period, it is perplexing why the arts (both religious and non-religious) did not flourish. After the 6th century AD, Shaivism and Vaishnavism developed rapidly, which is a separate story. Apart from Shaivism and Vaishnavism, there might have been practices like hero stone worship and mother goddess worship. However, there is insufficient evidence written about them. In Tamil Nadu, the hero stone at Arasala puram in the Villupuram district is considered the oldest (from the 5th century AD). No hero stones predating the 5th century AD have been discovered in Tamil Nadu so far.

The Following are the Views Expressed by Historians Regarding the Kalabhra dynasty's Period of rule and their Religious Practices.

- 1) Sankaran - He suggests that the Kalabhras might have ruled Tamil Nadu from the 6th century AD to the 8th century AD. However, his opinion is not widely accepted because the period he refers to was actually the time of the Pallava rule in Tamil Nadu.
- 2) Nilakanta Sastri - The renowned historian Nilakanta Sastri states that the Kalabhra period was from AD 300 to AD 600. Most historians agree with his view. He also mentions that the Kalabhra rulers might have been followers of Buddhism.
- 3) Sadasiva Pandarathar - His opinion aligns with that of Nilakanta Sastri
- . 4) Arokiyasamy - He claims that the Kalabhra rule lasted from AD 400 to AD 600.
- 5) Srinivasa Iyengar - He argues that the Kalabhras ruled Tamil Nadu from AD 450 to AD 550. His opinion is somewhat acceptable
- . 6) Venkayya - He states that the Kalabhras were followers of Jainism.
- 7) Srinivasa Iyengar - He also claims that the Kalabhra rulers were followers of Buddhism. However, his view is not entirely acceptable and might be based on archaeological evidence.
- 8) K.K. Pillai - He suggests that the Kalabhras could have been followers of both Jainism and Buddhism. His opinion is somewhat acceptable.

The scholar Venkata Raman states that the term "Kali (or Kali Kula)" refers to "Jainism.".

Literature Review

As we have already mentioned, it is not possible to write research articles primarily based on literary sources alone. The emergence of Tamil literature was sparse from the 3rd century CE to the 6th century CE. Therefore, it is difficult to gain knowledge about the Kalabhras and their religion. Although Buddhist references are found in literary works like "Manimekalai," it can be said that it originated in the 2nd century CE. During the Kalabhra period, an important Buddhist literary work called "Abhidhamma Avatara" was composed by Buddhadatta. He was a contemporary of the Kalabhra king Achutha Vikranta. It is written that Buddhism existed in Tamil Nadu during the Kalabhra reign and that monasteries were present. The presence of Jainism during the Kalabhra period is well evidenced by the work "Naladiyar." Sekkizhar also mentioned the Kalabhras in his composition, the "Periya Puranam."

“காவிரி பட்டண ரம்மே நானா ராமோ பநு ஸாபிதே
நேலாஸ விகராதார பாஸாத பதி மண்டித
காரிதே கணதாசேன் தஸ்சீனிய மனோரமே”

-lines of Abidhammavadharam

The Impact of the Eighteen Lesser Texts in Research

There are various opinions among historians regarding the period during which the Eighteen Lesser Texts were written. Some researchers believe that these texts were composed during the late Sangam period, while others suggest they were created in the "Post-Sangam" period.

Only a few of the Eighteen Lesser texts are useful for this study. If these texts emerged during the transitional period after the Sangam era, some of them make references to Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The period from the 3rd century AD to the 6th century AD, known as the "Kalabhra period" or the "Dark Age," is referred to as the "post-Sangam transitional period."

It is believed that the aforementioned religions existed during the Kalabhra period. However, there is insufficient archaeological evidence to confirm this. Therefore, the influence of the Eighteen Lesser texts on the study of Kalabhra religions is minimal. There is no doubt that this could change in the future.

Jainism

The inscriptional evidence from the 3rd century AD to the 6th century AD (Tamil-Brahmi and Vatteluttu inscriptions) illustrates the growth of Jainism in Tamil Nadu. Among these are the Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions from Pugalur, Mamandur, Kunnakudi, Thondur, Tiruchirappalli, Neganurpatti, and Onampakkam, as well as the Vatteluttu inscription from Thirunathar Hill, which indicate the spread of Jainism.

These inscriptions mention that beds for Jain monks were donated, but do not mention the creation of Tirthankara sculptures. This suggests that Jain Tirthankara sculptures may have appeared in Tamil Nadu only after the 6th century AD. This raises the question of why the “Yaksha and Yakshi” Sculptures of the Jain Tirthankaras were not included at this location.

In Jainism, the sculptures of the yaksha and yakshi might have been created as a result of the influence of Hindu religious principles. In Tamil Nadu, the sculptures of yaksha and yakshi alongside Jain Tirthankaras might have been crafted only after the 6th century CE.

Jainism during the Kalabhra period

It is known from archaeological evidence, such as excavation reports and inscriptions, that the Kalabhras followed Jainism and Buddhism. We have already mentioned the views of various historians regarding the presence of Jainism during the Kalabhra rule.

One significant figure is Mylai. Seeni. Venkata Sami. He has mentioned the presence of Jainism during the Kalabhra period as follows: "The Kalabhras predominantly followed

Jainism, and only those who conquered the Chola country adhered to Buddhism." The notion that the Kalabhras were associated with Jainism is a widely held view among historians.

It is known that there are two divisions in Jainism. During the Kalabhra period, the "Digambara Jain" sect might have been prevalent. In Tamil Nadu, the "Digambara" sect was more influential than the "Svetambara" sect.

Archaeological Evidences

In some excavations in Tamil Nadu, terracotta sculptures of Jain and Buddhist deities (YAKSHIS) dating from the 3rd century AD to the 6th century AD have been found. Noteworthy among these are the excavations at Poluvampatti and Mel Sithamur. Although terracotta sculptures of Jain deities have been discovered, no terracotta sculptures of Tirthankaras have been found in the excavations conducted so far.

Dravidian Association (Dramila Sangam)

The Dravidian Sangam was established in 470 AD by the Jain monk Vajranandi, a disciple of Poochiyapathar. During this period, the Kalabhras were ruling Tamil Nadu. This Sangam was likely formed with the intention of spreading Jainism throughout Tamil Nadu. Although this Sangam was established during the Kalabhra period, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that they provided any donations to it.

Buddhism

Historian Mayilai Sree. Venkata Sami points out that the claim made by some historians, suggesting that Buddhism may have arrived in Tamil Nadu only after the late Sangam period, specifically after the 3rd century CE, is incorrect. As evidence, he cites the work "Manimekalai" by the poet Koolavanikan Seethalai Sathanar.

Furthermore, it is clarified here that the Buddhist monk referred to as "Young Bodhiar" belongs to the Late Sangam period. If his statement is true, Buddhism might have emerged in Tamil Nadu even before the Late Sangam period.

In the early 5th century AD, a Buddhist monk named Dharma Pala, who lived during that time, mentions in one of his written works titled "Netti Attasudda" that a vihara built by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka is located in Kanchipuram. Buddhism, which flourished from the 1st century AD to the 5th (or 6th) century AD, may have subsequently lost its strength.

It is said that the ancient port city of the Cholas, Kaveri Poompattinam, had seven viharas built by Mahendra, a relative of Ashoka. In the 2nd century AD, these viharas were led by a person known as "Aravana Adigal."

In the 4th century AD, the Kalabhra king Achutha Vikkantha supported a Buddhist elder named Buddha Dhatar, who praised the Chola region and the Kaveri River's fertile plains. Here, a Buddhist monastery built by Kana Dasar features large gates surrounded by tall walls..

Buddha Vihara, Budha mangalam

This Buddhist monastery appears to have been built in the 3rd or 4th century AD. The Buddhist scholar Buddha thathar praised the Buddhist monastery at Budha Mangalam in the Chola country. Since there are mentions of Urayur, referred to as "Uraga Puram" in Pali, there might have been Buddhist monasteries here as well.

Mayura Pattinam Buddha Vihara

In what is now known as Mayiladuthurai, there existed a Buddhist monastery in the 4th century AD in the area called "Mayura Pattinam."

Nagapattinam Buddhist Vihara

Historian Mylai. Srini. Venkata Swamy suggests that Dharmapala stayed in a Buddhist monastery built here in the 5th century AD or earlier, but it is unclear to what extent this is true.

Aside from the aforementioned, there may be some other traces of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. For example, it is said that during the 2nd century AD, Ilangilli, the younger brother of Killi Valavan who ruled the Chola country, established a "Buddhist monastery" to the southwest of Kanchipuram. Before the 5th century AD, the Buddhist ascetic Kosar lived there with his friends Sumathi and Jothi Balar.

Buddhist settlements during the Kalabhra period

- 1) Sanga Magai
- 2) Nagapattinam
- 3) Uraiyur
- 4) Madurai
- 5) Thanjavur
- 6) Kanchipuram

The aforementioned towns are mostly located in the Chola region, which supports the claim of historian Mayilai. Srini. Venkata Sami.

Buddhist Deities

- 1) Kandhirpaavai
- 2) Chatur Maha Rajika
- 3) Shakra
- 4) Avalokiteshvara

Archaeological Evidences

Writing such research articles based on archaeological evidence, like excavation reports, is essential. There is no doubt that these archaeological sources will further strengthen the arguments presented. Although various opinions exist among historians regarding the emergence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, these evidences have the potential to alter existing perspectives.

Excavation at Kaveri Poom Pattinam

In the excavation conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India at Kaveripoompattinam in 1963-64, a Buddhist vihara with five square rooms was discovered. The walls of this structure were built using large square bricks, oriented from the southeast to the northwest. Additionally, walls adorned with lime decorations and a small bronze statue of Buddha, a terracotta sculpture of a broken female deity (possibly Kandhir Pavai), Buddha's footprints, as well as symbols like the swastika and the Srivatsa were found. According to the Silappadikaram, this site dates back to the 2nd century CE. The findings from this excavation provide evidence that Buddhism was in a flourishing state before the 3rd century CE.

Additionally, a Buddhist footprint from the 3rd to 4th century CE and a small bronze Buddha sculpture from the 5th century CE were discovered here. Notably, an excavation conducted by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department uncovered a terracotta Buddha head and foot from the 4th century CE. In the Silappatikaram, and Manimekalai the term "Indra Vikara Seven" confirms both the presence of Vikara here and the name "Indra Vikara" associated with it.

The Lines of Manimekalai describes Buddhist Viharas in Kaviri Poom Pattinam Alice Poompuhar.

“பொன் திகழ் புத்த பீடிகை போற்றும்”

“பெளத்தன் மாறாய் நின்ற சாங்கியன்”

Pallaveswaram Buddha Vihara (or) Temple

Here, the remains of a Buddhist temple built with red bricks have been discovered, dating back to the 6th century AD.

Vedic Rituals in Kalabras Period

The performance of Vedic rituals such as sacrifices and fire rituals is considered one of the religious practices of the Aryans. References to these can be found in Sangam literature, suggesting they may have been incorporated into Tamil culture after the 6th century BCE. Historians say that during the Kalabhra period, specifically the 3rd century CE, Vedic religion declined while Jainism and Buddhism flourished. An example of this is the Velvikudi Copper plate of the Pandya king Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan.

In the 8th century AD, the Vēļvikkudi inscription mentions that the Pandya king, Palyaga Salai Mudukudumi Peruvazhuthi, granted the village of Vēļvikkudi as a gift to a Brahmin named Narkotran, who was the head of the village of Korkai. Narkotran performed a Vedic ritual to enhance the prosperity of the king's reign. As a reward for this ritual, the king bestowed this gift.

It is noted that the "Kali Kings" who followed seized this donation, and the Pandya King Kadungon recovered it from the Kalabhras. However, the Vatteluttu inscription from Poolankurichi, dating to the 5th century AD, provides a completely different account.

This inscription was carved during the reign of the Kalabhra king, Sēndhan Kūrran. It states that a person named "Engumaan," who was both the son of "Vēļ Marugan" and held the title "Kadalaka Perum Padaithalaivan," established two "temple guilds" and a "Kottam" It appears that the right to worship there was granted exclusively to a specific group of people. Furthermore, the inscription contains references to "Brahmadeya."

The renowned archaeologist Mr. Natana Kasinathan suggests, "These two clans could represent either a Shiva or Vishnu temple." Historian Mayilai Srini Venkata Sami states, "The Kalabhras were not opposed to Brahmins; on the contrary, they made donations. They confiscated lands from the Brahmins for some reason." Although historical researchers mention that the Kalabhra king Achyuta Vikkandan had an interest in Shaivism and Vaishnavism, there is no substantial evidence of donations made to these traditions.

In the Pulankurichi inscription, the term "Thadapalli" appears, which means "Jain monastery." This suggests that the Kalabhras supported not only Jainism but also other religions like Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Here, it is essential to explain the viewpoint of the historian Dr. K.K. Pillai. "During the Kalabhra period, it is said that religions such as Vaidika, Shaivism, Brahmavada, Ajivika, Nikanda, Sankhya, Vaisheshika, and Buddhism (or Lokayata) existed".

Based on this information, it seems that during the reign of the Kalabhras, significant importance was given to Vedic rituals, and donations may have been provided for them. However, apart from the inscriptions at Pulankurichi, there are no other substantial pieces of evidence to confirm this, which makes it a challenging assertion.

An Analytical Study of the Vēļvikkudi Copper Plates – Pūlangkurichi Inscription.

The Vēļvikkudi copper plate and the Pūlangkurichi inscription are crucial archaeological evidence that help understand the history of the Kalabhras. It is essential to compare these pieces of evidence and examine the contradictions between them.

The "Velvikkudi Copperplate" of Pandya King Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan mentions that the Kalabhras seized land belonging to the Brahmins, which was later recovered by Kadungon Pandya in the 6th century AD. However, the Pulankurichi inscription refers to the "Brahmadeya" land granted to the Brahmins. This inscription is 300 years older than the Velvikkudi Copperplate. It predates the time of Pandya Kadungon, suggesting that the

Kalabhras must have donated lands to the Brahmins before Kadungon launched his military campaign against them.

The Kalabhras brought Tamil Nadu under their rule in the 3rd century AD. If that is the case, the event mentioned in the Velvikkudi inscription, "the confiscation of Brahmadeya lands," must have occurred in the intervening period between the 3rd and 4th centuries AD. In the 6th century AD, Kadungon Pandya retrieved these lands and returned them to the descendants of "Narkorran."

The early rulers of the Kalabhra dynasty might have opposed the Vedic religion. However, the Kalabhras who came after the 4th century AD might have adhered to some religious tolerance. Examples of such Kalabhra rulers include Chendhan Kootran and Achutha Vikranthan. Based on certain contradictions found in the Velvikudi copper plates and the inscriptions at Pulankurichi, some historians propose that the Kalabhras were not against Brahmins.

Conclusion

During the Kalabhra period, Shaivism and Vaishnavism did not gain significant prominence, and due to the lack of archaeological and historical evidence related to them, many historians consider the Kalabhra rule as a "dark age" in Tamil history. However, this perspective cannot be fully accepted. Archaeological and inscriptional evidence confirms that the Kalabhras did give importance to Shaivism and Vaishnavism, aside from Jainism and Buddhism. The Pulankurichi inscription serves as an excellent proof of this.

The historian Mylai. Srin. Venkata Sami refutes the claim made by some historians that the Kalabhras supported Jainism because they came from the "Kannada" region. Regardless of the origins, some Kalabhras were patrons of Shaivism and Vaishnavism and were tolerant of different religions. However, there might have been some political reasons behind this. In the future, this can be proven based on archaeological evidence that may be discovered.

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