

The Status of the Paraiyas in Medieval South India: A Study Based on Inscriptions

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Abstract

The medieval period of South Indian history was the time of the Imperial Cholas and the Vijayanagar rulers, during which Brahmanical Hinduism and the varnashrama social order achieved their consolidation and hence visually hardened caste stratification. This aided the beginning of institutionalizing untouchability. Paraiyas, an occupational group in South India, largely occupied an anomalous position during this period. While later historical accounts saw them as a homogenously underprivileged community, contemporary epigraphical evidence provided a different picture. Medieval inscriptions instituted that Paraiyas enjoyed distinct social, economic, and occupational privileges, participated in village administration, contributed to temple economies, and served in military and artisanal capacities. Simultaneously, they were recording their painful erosion of social status into increasing restrictions, economic dependency, and conditions of agrarian servitude. The present study attempts a critical exploration of the inscriptions, with particular reference to the Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagar ages, with a view to examining the emerging status of Paraiyas and thus sharpening the contrast between privilege and subordination in Medieval Tamil society.

Keywords: Paraiyas, Untouchability in Medieval South India, Chola and Vijayanagar Inscriptions, Varnashrama Dharma, Caste Hierarchy, Socio-Economic Status, Village Assemblies, Temple Economy.

Introduction

The medieval period in South India is marked by political stability, agrarian growth, an economic system around temple centers, and Brahmanical Hindu norms gaining prevalence in society. During the Chola-Vijayanagar period in history, society began to take shape in complete alignment with Varnashrama Dharma, an endeavor aimed at codifying social order, occupations, and rituals in society. As Varnashrama Dharma started gaining further prevalence in society, caste barriers began to emerge with untouchability finding strength in society.

Within this somewhat stratified social group, Paraiyas developed into a community that does not easily lend itself to historical simplification. Though ultimately relegated to the space of Untouchables, during medieval instances of epigraphical record, Paraiyas were crucial to rural life. Paraiyas served as rural laborers, drummers, weavers, rural guards, revenue collectors, soldiers, and even in the capacity of naval pilots. Additionally, Paraya settlements were referred to as ceris, a number of them availing themselves of tax exemptions.

The references found on the Chola and Vijayanagar references show that Paraiyas participated in panchayat, possessing lands, paying taxes, and contributing to charities for temples. The titles Araiyan and Mutali bestowed on certain Paraiya individuals denote power and service recognition. Yet, together with the positive signs of Paraiya status, there were indications of increasing limitation on Paraiya life, Paraiyas were restricted from certain forms of dress, house type, ritualistic practices, and symbols of honor, as related through inscriptions from this period.

Also, this paper strives to recapture the socio-economic and political position of the Paraiyas in the medieval period through a careful scrutiny of the epigraphs, an attempt to subvert the essentialist constructs of caste domination, especially through the emergence of the privileged concept of marginalization itself.

Social and Economic Life of the Paraiyas during the Chola and Vijayanagar Period

The Medieval age especially during Imperial chola and Vijayanagar period, Brahmanical Hinduism was in a vigorous condition. The varnashrama or fold-fold class system became strong in the minds of the people and it therefore resulted in Untouchables. By the study of inscription available of this period reveals the existence of certain privileges for the untouchable caste particularly the Paraiyas occupied a dignified position in the society. They were educated and also possessed wealth and even paid tax to the State. They served as an army

in the village assembly, engaged in weaving and cultivation yet their general position marked a definitive decline in the society They were slowly been relegated to the position of agricultural slaves.

The Pariyas have enjoyed certain privilege during Chola and Vijayanagar period. They were considered as an important person in the village community as field laborers, drum beaters and weavers. They were given a position in the paddy field. It was they who removed the paddy from the straw and it was measured by a Paraiyan¹. They were called as **Ulaparaiyar**. They lived in the ceris. Rajaraja-I inscription, 1014 A.D. mentions about the ceris of the Ulaparaiyar was located on the eastern and western end of the main village and the area was exempted from taxation². There were some Paraiyar villages been taxed due to their prosperity. It is said that, they gifted some income from Paraicceri to a Siva temple which was in practice still the period of Vijayanagar king, Immadi Bukkanna, 1394 A.D.³. The other tax payer were Talaiyari's of the village. The tax of Talaiysri's, village officers was called as Vetti or Talaiyarikkam.

Vira Bukkanna Udyar inscription dated 406 A.D. says about the exemption of the Vettivari tax on oil mills, tax on washerman, tax on Uvachas etc.⁴. The Vettivari means Vetti or Vettiyan a word derived from the Sanskrit word Visti means "free for maintaining village servants"⁵. An inscription of Sundra Chola and Rajaraja Chola-I of 984-1014 A.D. stated that there was an exemption of tax from a gifted village⁶. According to Francis Buchanan, a Scottish Physician and geographer who embarked on remarkable journey through Southern India from 24th April, 1800 to 5th July 1801 covering approximately 4000 kilometers mentions about a tax on Totti and Talaiyari ranging from ½ seer to 10 seer⁷. In the later period, the Vettiyan became the Totti of the village by performing the function of scavenger, distributing tank water for various cultivators, carrier of tidings, especially death of the relatives of deceased, digger of grave and dispose of dead bodies.

There were other Pariyars having weaving as their occupation. The tax levied on them was called as Paraittariyirai. During the Chola period a village called Sarvamanya was having a number of tax collection namely Paraittari, Saliat, Tari, Accu tari and Tusagat tari. In this Salians were seem to have been a section of Paraiyar who in later period were scheduled in list of Scheduled Caste of Tamil Nadu⁸.

The Pariyas had another profession like beating drums on occasion of festival, marriage and funerals. They were tax collected on them during Medieval period. According to Rajaraja-III inscription the tax collected was called as Paraiyirai⁹. Due to this tax, there was quarrel between the Paraiyar and the residents of 24 villages that they refused to beat drums on specific occasion. Later the dispute was settled by Kankaiaraiyan, one of the Virapantiyadeva's officer that the Pariyan should beat the drums for the caste Hindus on all occasion and to receive a Patakku of paddy and a fowl. Further, every resident of village who entitled the services of the Pariyars should measure from the yields a kalam and a tuni of paddy to them for their service¹⁰. The inscription further reveals that the drum beating payaras were landless and they subsisted on the perquisites granted to them by the village. There were rent free lands called as Paritti taimai¹¹. The drum used by Paraiyar during funeral and marriage was called as Parait tappattai or Parait tampattam¹². In Tamil Nadu Paraiccerimelam is used both for both marriage and funeral procession¹³. Even in temple festivals drum namely Kovil melam or cami melam for God as distinct from the parimelam used by pariyars.

Changing Privileges and the Gradual Decline in the Social Status of the Paraiyas

The Paraiyar privilege was safeguarded zealously is mentioned in inscription available in 1665 A.D.¹⁴. The Paraiyar of the Srivilliputtur village claimed the same rights enjoyed by the Kutumpas of the same village. The privileges such as the right to use a white horse, white parasol and keratti, to wear a pavatai, a pair of Cilampu and two Kotukku, to construct a 16 pillared pantal on festival occasions, to use three ters and 18 kinds of musical instruments during funeral procession. There was dispute regarding the privilege of enjoyment and it was decided and inscribed in a copper plate grants that the Pariyars were to enjoy only few rights such as a three pillared pantal for festival occasions, one Kotukku, one Cillampu, one Mappu, one Pantam, a house without a second floor and the payment of fee for funerals. There were some Paraiyar's rich and even made donations to temples. Pattara Nampi made a gift of a hall called Svapnamantapa to a temple¹⁵. There is another information mentioned and recorded in an inscription, a gift of twenty-five Kalancu for burning a perpetual lamp in the temple by Valluvan Nam, a pariya sect¹⁶. There is a record that the Paraiyar's were hero. A person, kaliviriya Muttaraiya belonging to Valluvan, a prayan sect lost his life while fighting against thieves on behalf of Perumakkai, great men of the village. For this Perumakkai gave a grant of land called Kalippatti to his son¹⁷.

The title Araiyan is given to a soldier of the Chola king or to a personnel secretary to the king. Puvan Pariyan, a member of body guard of the king received the title Araiyan. Many of the soldiers of such division were called as Valankai Matrar, who were Paraiyas. The Paraiyas were members of the village assembly. They held the position of deciding important matters such as revision of taxes, loyalty to a particular chief. The leaders

of the Paraiya who took part in the village assembly were called as Parai Mutalis¹⁸. The word Mutali means “first among others”. In the Putukkottai State Inscription, Pariyas were educated and were able to sign in the document is been mentioned in the stone inscription. The Pariyars were serving to king naval as a pilot of the ships. Only some were educated and were in government service.

The Medieval period inscriptions, particularly Rajaraja Chola I and Maravarman Sundra Pandiyan I, describe about the boundaries of tax-free lands donated to the temples in which village, suburbs called ceris is mentioned. The Pariyars were having separate ceri, burial ground¹⁹. There was Tintacceris, is occupied by separate section of Paraiyas.

In the South Indian Inscription, there is a mention about the different kinds of peoples attended the village assembly was from Antana to Arippan. All the people assembled and took a common decision. But there is a mention of low caste like Sivabrahmanas, Cakkillis, Arippan, who had a separate burial ground even the Andana had separate burial ground²⁰. The Rajadhiraja II, 1177 A.D. of medieval period says that the laborers shall not become Vel, Aracu and Kaviti. The potters, drummer’s, barbers shall not keep locks of hair and during their mourning and joyous occasion big drum called Perikai shall not be used, should not keep slaves²¹. During Medieval days, particularly in Tamil Nadu the Untouchablity, Slavery and the Paraiyas, Pulaiyas were facing problems to have equal footing in the society.

Conclusion

The epigraphical sources from medieval South India testify to the fact that the social standing of the Paraiyas was neither constant nor always subordinate over the whole Chola and Vijayanagar period. They held an important place in village India as well as in the kingdom in the early stages, particularly in performing crucial functions in the fields of economy, ritual, and administration. Their participation in farming, weaving, military service, temple work, and village governance speaks for their social integration in a way totally different from the idea of their total outcasting in the later period.

However, the gradual development of the varnashrama ethos and the rigidifying structure of caste hierarchies resulted in the systematic curtailment of the privileges of the Paraiyas. The growing restrictions on social symbols, vocations, and ritualistic participation increasingly confined them to subordinate roles. Finally, many of the Paraiyas came to be relegated to the role of landless laborers or servants of the countryside with reliance solely upon traditional perquisites rather than material resources. This marks the development of untouchability with any form of agrarian servitude in medieval Tamil social structure itself.

Hence, it may be said that the history of the Paraiyas in this period may be viewed as an indication of an important change in the society in South India in that there was a transformation from an integrative structure in castes to that of segregation in caste. The view of the history of the Paraiyas not only provides an insight into the history of caste in the medieval period, it also points out the value of the epigraphs as an important source material for the history of South India in the medieval period.

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