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**RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF TAMIL COUNTRY
UNDER THE NAYAKS OF MADURAI**



G. Thiyagarajan

Assistant Professor in History , A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College
,(Autonomous) , Poondi, Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu.

Short Profile

G. Thiyagarajan is working as an Assistant Professor at Department of History in V. V. M. Sri Pushpam College ,(Autonomous) , Poondi, Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu. He has completed M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. He has teaching experience of 14 years.



ABSTRACT:

Saivism and Vaishnavism revived remarkably under the Nayaks of Madurai. The Hindus developed and patronised the temple architecture in noted centres like Tiruttani, Kanchi, Srirangam, Tanjore, Kumbakonam, Madurai, Ramaeswaram etc. New temples were also built and old temples were renovated. The Nayak rulers did a lot for the growth of Saivism. The Saivites were of two sects, Pasupathas and Kalamukhas. Pasupathas had a large gathering in those days. Among them were Vaidika Pasupathas and Avidika Pasupathas. The Kalamukhas followed the veda dhrama. During the Nayak period, Siddhas spread

their philosophical ideas. Pattinattar, Pampatti Siddha and Ahappey Siddha were prominent among them. They propagated their ideas to undermine the influence of Christianity. Vaishnavism also began to spread even though there were two schools of Thought.

KEYWORDS

Vadagalai, Thengalai, Valangai, Idangai.

INTRODUCTION :

Besides, during the Nayak period a clash between the two schools of Vadagalai and Thengalai broke out regarding their ideology. Regarding the doctrine of salvation, the Vadagalai school held that self effort was necessary for the salvation and the Thengalai school held that self-effort was not necessary and the grace of God was spontaneous and overflowing. The Vadagalai believed in the caste system but the Thengalai held that a man of lower order was equal to Brahmin if he was a true devotee of God. They had separate headquarters. The headquarters of Vadagalai was Kanchipuram and Thengalai at Srirangam. The staunch supporter of Vadagalai was Vedanta Desikar.¹

The Nayaks of Madurai rendered remarkable service for both Vadagalai and Thengalai Vaishnava temples. Chittirai festival was at first inaugurated and celebrated with great pomp and grandeur by Tirumalai Nayak in Madurai. He also celebrated Algar festival and Chittirai festival during the month of Chittirai in a grand manner. Vijayadasami, Taippusam, Karthigai, Deepavali, Pongal and Pittu Thiruvizha festivals were also celebrated by the people. During this period, Ramappaiyan, the Commander of Tirumalai Nayak, led an expedition against Mysore and defeated the Mysore King. After the victory, he returned to Madurai through Dindigul and Kannivadi. On his return, he went to Palani and worshipped Lord Muruga where he found the priests belonged to non-Brahmin caste. As the priest belonged to Pandaram caste, Ramappaiyan refused to get the prasadam from a person other than Brahmin. Hence he immediately ordered that only Brahmins should do the work of priesthood. This incident proved the fact that non-Brahmins were not permitted to perform priestly functions.²

The Hindus worshipped a large number of divinities of varied descriptions. Traditions related to the gods fighting with the fury of savages and indulging in romantic escapades haunted the imagination of the inhabitants. In Tirunelveli region, Tiruchendur, Ramanathapuram, Alwarthirunagari and Srivaikuntam served as seats of great temples. Every caste and every family had its own private devil temples called Peikovils. Temples, large as well as small, had independent source of income. The people worshipped all main deities. Every village had its guardian deity known as Uramma among the Tamils and Gramdevata among the Telugus. This guardian deity was always feminine, whose benevolence was sought for the welfare of the village community. Hindus went on pilgrimage to places, like Rameswaram, Puri and Banaras.³

The frequent disputes between the right hand and left hand castes disturbed the peace of the land. The Valangai or Right Hand faction included the more respectable castes. The Idangai or Left Hand group comprised of the Panchalas, Pallas and Chakkliyas. A close scrutiny of the Right Hand faction and the Left Hand faction revealed that the root cause of the problem was the importance attached to status. It is the forerunner of the modern grouping of castes. The Nayak period witnessed the spread of Christianity in the society. They won converts from the Paravas, Parayas, Kallars, Nadars and Brahmins.⁴ Father Beschi (1680-1747), who served as the minister of Chanda Sahib for a short period, guided the missionary activities in the middle of the century.⁵ In 1765, the Jesuits of Pondicherry extended their activities into Tamil Country.⁶ The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K) was founded by the Danish Lutherans, Protestant mission in the Carnatic in 1765. Rev. Schwartz, a German by birth, was the greatest of the protestant missionaries of the period. Though a man of unaffected modesty, he ably assisted the British in the annexation of Tanjore. He founded the Tanjore Mission. He not only converted a large number of Nadars and Kallars to Protestantism but also established schools at Tanjore and Tiruchirappalli. The gospel came from Tranquebar to Tirunelveli via Tiruchirappalli and

Tanjore. It was Schwartz who baptised the first convert and sanctified the Protestant Church in Tirunelveli.⁷ The Tranquber Mission of the Lutherans suffered an eclipse because of the paucity of able missionaries and the marked decline of religious zeal in Europe. Its work was revived and extended by British Missionary Societies.⁸

The political conflicts interrupted missionary activities and during the disorders, the belligerent forces destroyed the churches. The Parayas who were treated as the unclean people, accepted Christianity in large numbers and emerged as a dominant group in church. The higher caste people looked upon conversion as tantamount to their degradation to the lowest social status. The converted Christians on their part retained the Hindu rituals and caste system. A feature of the Christian wedding as in a Hindu marriage was the procession from the church. The rulers promoted religious harmony. For instance, in 1773 Queen Meenakshi of Madurai granted lands as gift to a mosque at Tiruchirappalli.⁹

The temples in Tamil land were the repository of Hindu culture and civilization from early days. The rulers of Vijayanagar restored worship in the temples, repaired old temples and towers, settled disputes among temple servants and made extensive endowments in the shape of jewels, lands, taxes and other sources of income.¹⁰

The various personal gifts of Kumara Kampana to the temples in Tamil Country demonstrated his benevolent temple administration. An inscription from Ponpatti, Arantangi taluk of Tanjore district, mentions the gift of taxes for the midnight service of deity Virrirundaperumal. A record from Tiruppukkuli mentions the gift of a jewel by Kumara Kampana to the deity, Vijayaraghava Perumal.¹¹

The temples maintained health centres for the convenience of the people. An inscription of A.D. 1293 at Srirangam refers to the existence of a health centre (arogyasalai). The significant aspect of the activities of temples in the Vijayanagar days was the encouragement of small industries. King Krishnadevaraya granted a house and certain honours to Vyasraya Tirtha Sripada Vodeyar. The Srimushnam inscription indicates that the temple had also some police functions. Such rights were given to the temples by the local institutions.¹²

Social Customs and Practices

The family, the smallest unit of the social order, functioned as an established institution. Women treated their husbands with respect. Both men and women used varieties of ornaments and they were put on at every possible point of the ears, nose, neck, arms, wrists, above elbows, feet, ankles and toes. These ornaments were made of precious metals, stones and glass. The ornaments in common use included rows of beads, bangles and ear-rings. All the castes permitted the beginning of wedded life at an early age for the happiness of the domestic life.¹³ During the festival occasions, they sent rice, coconut, jaggery, plantain, vessels and pots as gifts. The adopted son renounced all the claims to the property of the parents after adoption. A girl was rarely adopted. The devadasis or dancing girls of the temples sold their favours to those who solicited them. They charged two to four fanams for a night.¹⁴ Most of the castes seldom permitted divorce. The Maravas permitted both the husband and wife to dispense with their wedded life without giving any reason and to get re-married.¹⁵ The Brahmins settled a girl of the age between five and nine in marriage with a man of any age whether sixteen or sixty. More fantastic still was that even an old man of sixty years or above could have second marriage. The widowhood radically altered the life of a woman. The thali (sacred thread) was taken away from her neck. Even a poor and old Brahmin felt indignant at the suggestion of his marrying a widow with all the

charms of youth.¹⁶ In the Brahmin caste, the wedding ceremonies were marked by distinct stages, namely kasiyatra or pilgrimage by the bridegroom to Kasi (Banaras), kankanaor exchange of sanctified threads by the bride and bridegroom, kanyadanor gift of the virgin and mangala sutra dharanaor fastening of a chain around the neck. All religious practices varied from caste to caste.¹⁷

Thus during the Nayak Rule in Tamil Country, there prevailed religious differences even among the Vaishnavite sects of Vadagalai and Thengalai and social hierarchy based on the divisions of Valangai (Right Hand castes) and Idangai (Left Hand castes). Social customs were linked with the cultural practices. Religious observances were practiced and nurtured by all the castes according to their traditional conventions.

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