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## Charitable Endowments and Village Settlements: Insights from Pandya Inscriptions

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### ABSTRACT

In Tamil country, agriculture was the major industry and prideful profession since earlier times and it remained so in the medieval times too. The epigraphs reveal that the economy of the medieval Tamil country relied on agriculture to a larger extent. For agriculture, land was the basis. The land settlement in the entire medieval Tamil country had a village form. Villages constituted the most important economic unit. A substantial portion of medieval inscriptions pertains to land grants and transactions primarily associated with Brahmins and religious institutions. The diverse systems of land tenure under which such grants were issued effectively vested ownership rights in the beneficiaries, who assumed complete control over the lands. The administration of these properties was carried out by the beneficiaries themselves, often in collaboration with village assemblies. Charitable tenures were typically established through the purchase of land from prior owners or occupants, followed by a formal act of endowment. The gift charters frequently articulated in detail the rights, privileges, and, where applicable, the obligations attached to the grant. On rarer occasions, particularly in the case of royal authority or village assemblies, unassigned common lands were appropriated for such endowments.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Tamil region, agriculture constituted the primary industry and a highly esteemed profession since ancient times, maintaining its prominence throughout the medieval period as well. Epigraphic evidence highlights that the economy of medieval Tamil country was predominantly agrarian, with land serving as the fundamental basis for agricultural activity. As the principal resource for food production, land played a decisive role in sustaining human existence, for both agriculture and human survival were closely interlinked. Consequently, extensive tracts of land were devoted to cultivation. Over time, increasing demands for food and fodder necessitated the intensive utilization of land, making it the foundation for all forms of production—particularly agricultural production, which relied directly upon it. Historically, an individual's wealth or poverty was largely determined by the size and productivity of his cultivated landholdings.

A substantial portion of medieval inscriptions pertains to land grants and transactions primarily associated with Brahmins and religious institutions. The diverse systems of land tenure under which such grants were issued effectively vested ownership rights in the beneficiaries, who assumed complete control over the lands. The administration of these properties was carried out by the beneficiaries themselves, often in collaboration with village assemblies.

## Methodology

The sources utilized for the study can be broadly categorized into primary and secondary sources. The primary sources comprise inscriptions, archival records, foreign accounts, and literary works, while the secondary sources consist of published materials. The information collected from these sources was carefully examined to analyze various aspects related to the research topic. A chronological approach was adopted to present historical developments and establish their interconnections. Furthermore, critical analysis served as a vital tool in addressing the research objectives and uncovering the complexities of the issue. The interpretation of data ultimately facilitated a deeper understanding and critical evaluation of the subject matter under investigation.

## Objectives of the Study

This study aims to bring to light the Charitable endowments through Pandya inscription in the Medieval Tamil country.

- The study aims to trace systematically the land endowments to Brahmins.
- The study also attempts to trace systematically the charitable tenure to the temples.
- Finally, the study intends to critically examine the grant of land to a particular religion or sect.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Besides the abundant primary sources, many secondary works of eminent scholars and historians are available for the period under study.

K.A.N. Sastri's Pandyan kingdom from the earliest times to 16<sup>th</sup> century (Madras, 1972) is an exhaustive political and administrative history of the Pandyas.

A.J.Thinagaran's The Second Pandian empire (A.D.1190-1312) (Madurai,1987) is an excellent research output of the scholar. In his work, he gives a vivid description about the state of economy under the Pandya rulers.

R. Thirumalai's The Pandyan Township II (Chennai, 1997) is an excellent work in this field. It is notable for containing epigraphical information about the land occupancy in chola heartland, the bramadeyas of Pudukkottai district and land dues, irrigation in the pandyan townships.

T.V.Sadasiva Pandarattar's Pandiar Varalaru (Tirunelvely, 1956) is a pioneering work for this period. It gives notable information about the achievements of individual rulers of the Second Pandian Empire.

Noboru Karashima's Ancient to Medieval – South Indian Society in Transition (New Delhi, 2009) critically examines the change of society from ancient to medieval.

## Charitable Tenures

In the medieval Tamil region, villages predominantly functioned as settlements of landowning communities. Agricultural lands were organized under diverse tenurial systems, resulting in a wide spectrum of ownership patterns. Epigraphical evidence indicates that landownership during this period was classified primarily into communal ownership, individual ownership, state ownership, vellanvagai, brahmadeyam, charitable tenures, and service tenures. The existence of these varied forms of ownership served specific socio-economic and administrative purposes. While communal and state ownership represented continuations of earlier traditions, the other categories emerged and became firmly institutionalized during the medieval period. The medieval Tamil states maintained clear distinctions among these tenurial forms and exercised administrative control over them.

Both royal authority and public patronage manifested in the form of land endowments to Brahmins, temples, mathas, Jaina pallis, and ara-salais. These grants were typically conferred without the expectation of material service from the recipients, as the act of donation itself was regarded as a meritorious deed by the donors.

## Land Endowments to Brahmins

In the medieval Tamil region, lands granted to Brahmins were known as brahmadeyams. These endowments, consisting either of individual plots or entire villages, were typically conferred in recognition of the Brahmins' Vedic scholarship or to promote the spread of their religious learning. Such Brahmin settlements were also called chaturvedimangalams. A brahmadeya represented a distinct settlement type, administered collectively by the Brahmins themselves. These villages were primarily inhabited by Brahmins who formed an assembly known as the sabha, responsible for managing local governance. During this period, two main forms of brahmadeyams were in practice: ganabhogam and ekabhogam.<sup>1</sup>

An inscription from Srirangam in the Trichinopoly district, dated 1312 A.D. during the reign of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya III, attests to a land grant in the form of iraiyili-brahmadeya.<sup>2</sup>

## Endowments to Religious Institutions

### Devadanam

Land grants made to religious institutions, particularly temples, were collectively referred to as *devadana*. More specifically, lands endowed to Śiva temples were commonly designated as *devadana*. Such donations were made by kings, local chiefs, village assemblies, landlords, and even private individuals. An inscription from Neivasal in the Pudukkottai district, dated 1249 A.D. and issued during the reign of Jatavarman Kulasekhara II, records a *devadana* land grant by Kalvayil-Nadalvan for performing the *tiruppalli-eluchchi* ritual in honor of Tiruvahattisvaramudaiya-Nayanar at Nelvayil.<sup>3</sup>

When land was granted to a temple, it did not automatically acquire tax-free status; rather, the responsibility for paying taxes to the State typically rested with the donor, unless an explicit exemption was granted through a royal decree or by the local assembly. The original endowment deeds generally specified whether such lands were liable to pay state dues at full rates, reduced rates, or under a permanently fixed assessment.

Temple lands were often designated as *iraiyili*, signifying tax-free status. In such instances, the donated lands were exempted from taxation and were referred to as *devadana iraiyili* or tax-free *devadana*. An inscription of Maravarman Sundara Pandya, located on the north wall of the Śiva temple at Avivur in Aruppukkottai Taluk, Kamarajar District, records a grant of two and a half *ma* of land as *iraiyili-devadana* by Alagan Arutalapperumal for the purpose of providing food offerings to the temple.<sup>4</sup>

The *devadanas* are often designated further as *kudinikki-devadana*<sup>5</sup> or *kudininga-devadana*<sup>6</sup> in relation to the mode of their utilization by the temple. *Kudis* were tenants, occupants or cultivators.<sup>7</sup> *Kudininga* means the previous tenants who were not evicted from the land. *Kudinikki* means the previous tenants who were evicted from the land. In this case the original owner was removed,

presumably after giving him some compensation price, and the land becomes the property of the temple, which has to get income from the land by engaging some tenant-cultivators or hired labourers.<sup>8</sup>

### Land endowments to a Particular religion/sect

Though the most common category of land grant to the temples was known as *devadana*, specific nomenclatures were used to refer to the grant of land to a particular religion or sect such as *tiruvudaiyattam*, *tirunamattukkani*, *mathapuram* and *pallichchandam*.

#### Tiruvudaiyattam

Lands granted to and held by Vaiṣṇavite shrines or Viṣṇu temples were referred to as *tiruvudaiyattam*. In certain cases, these temple lands were granted tax exemptions, and such lands were specifically designated as *iraiyili-tiruvudaiyattam*, indicating their tax-free status.

An inscription from Tirukkachchur in the Chingleput district, dated 1258 A.D. and issued during the reign of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I, records the donation of 23 *veli* of land as *iraiyili-tiruvudaiyattam* to the deity Perumal Narpattennayiravinnagar Emberuman of the Marundisvara temple. The grant was collectively made by three individuals: Panchanadivana Nilangangaraiyar (5 *veli*), Nallanayanar Nilangangaraiyar (8 *veli*), and Arunagiri Perumal Nilangangaraiyar (10 *veli*).<sup>9</sup> An inscription from Pullabudangudi in the Tanjavur district, dated 1292 A.D. and issued during the reign of Maravarman Kulasekhara, records the sale of land as *tiruvudaiyattam* by the *urars* of Pavirimangalam to the deity Senapati Alvar of the Valvil Raman temple at Tiruppullampudankudi in Solamandalam.<sup>10</sup>

A thirteenth-century inscription from Attani in the Coimbatore district, issued during the reign of Sadayavarman Sundara Pandya, records the donation of the village of Attani as tax-free *tiruvudaiyattam* to the deity Sundarattoludaiyar at Kuvalur by the *nattavar* (local chiefs).<sup>11</sup>

#### Tirunamattukkani

Temples also possessed lands in absolute ownership, similar to other landholders, and such lands were referred to as *tirunamattukkani*. These lands were either acquired through purchase from previous owners or allocated to temples by village assemblies from common village lands.

An inscription from Tiruvakkarai in the South Arcot district, dated 1288 A.D. and issued during the reign of Maravarman Vikrama Pandya III, records the royal grant of land as *tirunamattukkani iraiyili* to the deity Aludaiya-Nayanar at Tiruvakkarai. The grant was intended to support a special daily service and an annual festival instituted by the king and named after himself.<sup>12</sup> Another inscription from the Satyagrinninatha-Perumal Temple at Tirumayyam in the Pudukkottai district, dated 1462 A.D., records the endowment of the village Sundara-Pandyanallur—including all its wet and dry lands and other appurtenances—as *sarvamanya tirunamattukkani* for meeting the expenses of worship and offerings. This grant was made by the chief Sundara Pandya Vijayalayadevar of Suraikkudi.<sup>13</sup>

Following the sovereigns and local chiefs, village assemblies also granted *tirunamattukkani* lands to temples. Likewise, individual landowners and private donors frequently endowed such lands for religious purposes. An inscription from Tirunedungulam in the Tiruchirappalli district, dated 1261 A.D. and issued during the reign of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I, records the donation of 12 *veli* of land—including *puncey* (dry lands), gardens, tanks, and shares—to the temple of Tirunedungalam-udaiya-Nayanar as *tirunamattukkani*. The grant was collectively made by the *nattavars*, *kaniudaiyars*, and *kaniudaiya-araiyars*.<sup>14</sup>

#### Mathappuram

The lands granted to and administered by the *mathas* were designated as *mathappuram*. An inscription from Ponamaravati in the Tiruchirappalli district, dated to 1236 A.D. and issued during the reign of Maravarman Sundara Pandya I, records the royal endowment of *nirnilam* and *puncey* lands located in Pillai Velarkudikkadu as *mathappuram* in favour of the *Sirivaranapiriyar Sri-matha*.<sup>15</sup> The Tirupparkadal inscription of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I, dated 1264 A.D., records a royal order granting three *veli* of land, exempted from taxes such as *kadamai*, *antarayam*, *ponvari*, and other customary dues, as *mathappura-iraiyili*.<sup>16</sup>

## Pallichchandam

The lands donated to and possessed by Jaina and Buddhist temples were designated as *pallichchandam*.<sup>17</sup> An epigraph discovered at the entrance of the natural cave to the east of the rock known as Alurutimalai in Ammasatram, Pudukkottai district, issued during the reign of Maravarman Sundara Pandya I, records a land grant in *Periyapallivayal* as *pallichchandam* to Nayanar Tirumanaimalai Alvar by a merchant.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Sundara Pandyaadeva exempted from taxation the lands endowed to the *Perunarkilicholapperumpalli-Alvar* of Kallarruppalli, which were held as *pallichanda-iraiyili* by the proprietors of the Jaina temple lands.<sup>19</sup>

## Salabhogam

The lands endowed to the *feeding houses* (*satras* or *chatras*), which provided sustenance to *apoorvins*, *sivayogins*, and *brahmans*. A thirteenth-century inscription from Kallidikkuruchchi in the Tirunelveli district, issued during the reign of Jatavarman Vira Pandya, records a royal order granting an endowment of 10 *ma* of tax-free land for the maintenance of a feeding house established on the banks of the river *Tanporundapperaru*, intended for the sustenance of Brahmins as well as the *Eka-dandi* and *Tri-dandi* sanyasins.<sup>20</sup> The foregoing evidences indicate that these tenures were instituted not solely by the king, but also by local chiefs, private individuals, and temples.

Charitable tenures were typically established through the purchase of land from prior owners or occupants, followed by a formal act of endowment. The gift charters frequently articulated in detail the rights, privileges, and, where applicable, the obligations attached to the grant. On rarer occasions, particularly in the case of royal authority or village assemblies, unassigned common lands were appropriated for such endowments. *Devedana* lands, in particular, were often demarcated with boundary stones inscribed with the emblems of the deity to whom they were consecrated.<sup>21</sup> Devadana lands were administered by temple authorities, but their management remained under the dual supervision of the village assembly on the one hand and the central government on the other.

Similar to *vellanvagai* and *brahmadeya* tenures, charitable tenures were also subject to alteration, either within their own categories or into other forms, through royal intervention. The Tiruppuvanam copper plates of Maravarman Sundara Pandya I record that the villages of Vagaikkudi, Mutturannarottai, and Sirukilankattur, which originally formed part of the *devadana* endowments of the temple of Tiruppuvanmudaiyar, were transferred and incorporated into Rajagambhira-chaturvedimangalam. The inscription further specifies that these three villages were required to render *kadamai* dues to the temple in both cash and kind.<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Pandya inscriptions offer profound insights into the socio-economic foundations of medieval Tamil society, where agriculture and landownership formed the core of rural life. The system of charitable endowments—such as *brahmadeyam*, *devadanam*, *mathappuram*, and *pallichchandam*—reflects a well-structured relationship between religion, economy, and governance. These grants not only reveal the patronage extended to Brahmins, temples, and religious institutions but also demonstrate how such endowments strengthened local administration and community integration. The inscriptions highlight that land donations, whether for spiritual merit or social welfare, played a vital role in shaping the agrarian landscape and sustaining religious and educational centres. The dual supervision of temple lands by both local assemblies and the state underscores the organised nature of medieval Tamil governance. Thus, charitable tenures, as documented in the Pandya inscriptions, illuminate the intertwined nature of faith, power, and agrarian economy in sustaining village settlements and cultural continuity.

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