

A STUDY OF MADURAI TELUGU NAYAK'S ENDOWMENT ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Histories of the society of the Madurai kingdom, there have been periods of progress, reform, regeneration, decay, dissolution and degeneration. The period of the Nayaks rule had its exemplary society which was earmarked for stability, prosperity, unity, security and tolerance. Hence the kingdom of the Nayaks was the cradle of Dravidian civilization and their capital Madurai, was the gate way to Dravidian culture, and also their people were Dravidian stock. The majority Hindu population spoke any one of the Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannerese, Tamil and Malayalam. The Urdu speaking Muslims and European Christians formed the minority in the society.

Key words

Society of the Madurai kingdom, Dravidian civilization, Hindu population

Introduction

The emigrants, from Vijayanagar Empire to Madurai along with the Nayak rulers, were Telugu speaking people. According to Robert Caldwell, Telugu is a Dravidian language and most of the people in the Tamil country are speaking Telugu language.¹ Even now, people of different castes, such as Brahmins, Chettiyars, Naidus or Nayaks, Rajus, Reddiyars, Kammalars, Chakkiliyars, Ottars, Melakaras etc., are speaking Telugu in Tamil Nadu. The ascendancy of the Nayaks initiated and encouraged the settlement of the Telugus mostly in the Madurai Kingdom. The Nayaks of Madurai bestowed peace, prosperity, political tranquility and cultural advancement. This sort of political, religious and economic changes had considerable influence over the social organisation and structure of the society.²

Social Stratification

The society was differentiated on the basis of the occupations and vocational activities of the people. With the support of the Nayaks the old traditional social set up continued without much change.³ There existed various social units, which had separate identity and distinctions. They were stratified in the social hierarchy as high and low. The high castes at the top level of the social ladder claimed utmost reverence and privileges whereas the members of the lowest groups were unprivileged, secluded or isolated. Among them there existed numerous grades depending on the nature of caste profession. In such a social system, the individual's life and occupation were determined at his birth irrespective of his tastes, talent and inborn qualities that lay behind beneath the caste. They avoided interdining with other castes or touching the hands of others etc. Generally caste restrictions were severe and if anybody broke the rules,

they faced social excommunication.⁴

The Officials and Differences

The Nayak kings were assisted by set of ministers and officials. Dalavay, Pradhani and Rayasam, formed the trio of the king's council. The other chief officials were Kanakkan, the accountant and Sthanapathi, the foreign secretary. Besides them, there were governors for the large provinces, viz.,⁵ Trichinopoly, Tinnevely and Satyamangalam. Among these three provincial governors, the governor of Tinnevely enjoyed high status and exercised large powers. Below the governors, there were powerful poligars. Among them the poligars of Manamadurai, Sendamangalam, Maramangalam, Salem and Dharapuram were powerful and the poligar of Kannivadi was considered the chief of the eighteen poligars of Dindigul. As they were conferred with a dignified status with hereditary right and definite proprietary rights over the land, they enjoyed vast powers and privileges and acted independently for the welfare and uplift of the society. The Nayak kings appointed Telugu and Tamil chieftains poligars indiscriminately in order to foster unity, solidarity and peace within the regions of the Madurai Kingdom.⁶

The Caste Hierarchy

The Nayaks migrated to Madurai kingdom, during the ascendancy of the rule of Visvanatha Nayak and surpassed the other caste people in efficiency and valour. Though they were permitted to participate in the administration, as chief military commanders and poligars, bulk of their community took to their traditional occupation, viz.,⁷ the agriculture. They mostly settled at river banks and fertile areas, where black or karisal soil and sheval or red soil lands were available in plenty. They cultivated the traditional crops, such as paddy, cotton, plaintain and grains like ragi and kambu and cereals like blackgram and bengalgram, in plenty. Even now the Naidus or the Nayakkar caste in the illages, are mainly cultivating these crops.

This group of people were found at Madurai and its suburbs. The village called Valayankulam near Madurai is inhabited by these caste people. The Parayas or the Pallans were engaged in agricultural activities as labourers and they had the occupation of digging wells, tanks and burial grounds. Some of them were famous for the performance of the folk art called, Thappattam, during the death ceremonies of the high class people. Even now in many villages, such a folk tradition is in vogue. The Paravas or the inhabitants of the coastal areas had the occupation of pearl-fishing, catching fish, producing salt and trading with Ceylon and Malabar coasts. The Nayak kings did not concentrate on the coastal regions and they left them to the influence of the Dutch and the Portugese traders and Christian Missionaries. The names of the streets at Madurai, especially around the Meenakshi temple reveal that there were innumerable sub-castes and the inhabitants had their own specific profession and on the basis of their occupation and castes, they settled in those streets. Some of the names of the streets are given below, which are still in existence:⁸

1. Chittrakarrar theru (painter's street)
2. Pachcharisikarar theru (raw rice seller's street)
3. Pookarar theru (flower vendor's street)

4. Valaiyalkarar theru (bangle seller's street)
5. Chunnambukarar theru (limestone seller's street)
6. Ezhuttanikarar theru (manuscript writer's street)
7. Kothan theru (mason's street)
8. Mettukammalar theru (artisan's street)
9. Vengallakadai theru (bronze vessels seller's street)
10. Chinnakadai uppukarar theru (salt vendors street).⁹

The above names of the streets reveal the occupations and castes of the people and their settlements which were the commemorative achievements of the Nayak rulers. Teppakulam theru is a street leading to teppakulam or a big tank which was constructed by king Thirumalai Nayak. Thirumalairayar Padithurai veedi is a street where Puttu thiruvila (one of the festivals of Meenakshi temple was revived by King Thirumalai Nayak) was celebrated every year on the banks of river Vaigai. Tamukkam salai is a street leading to a place called Tamukkam where Thirumalai Nayak had martial amusements with soldiers and wild animals. Now this place is utilised for conducting exhibition, fairs and functions. Another street near Mahal is called Pathu-thun sandhu where ten huge and massive pillars of the remnant palace are standing there. As this street has ten such pillars, it is called Pathu-thun sandhu. They are notable for the skill and architectural beauty of the Nayak age. The name of the streets at Madurai reveal the separation or isolation of castes in different streets. It testifies the encouragement given to the caste system and its rigidity. It is also visible and clear from the arrangement of temple's festivals, allotment of hamlets and renaming of the villages or settlements.¹⁰

Communal harmony

The policy of reconciliation and toleration of the Nayaks served as a unifying force to promote peace and harmony. The Tamil country was a land of ethnological ascendancy, during the Nayak period, which contributed lot for the introduction of new dialects and languages and inclusion of new clans or communities in the society which became a pluralistic one with composite culture. The inflow of immigrants from within the country and the advent of European traders and missionaries further enabled the society to experience the existence of composite culture. Though each group had its own identity and customary practices with its traditions, faiths and ways of life, there was amity and co-existence without any friction and religious riots in the society.¹¹

Trade and Industries

The age of the Nayaks, in the cultural history of Madurai kingdom, was considered a period of restoration of economy, accumulation of wealth and imitation of agricultural activities. The benevolent reign of Krishna Deva Raya of Vijayanagar was imitated by the Nayaks of Madurai. The Nayak rulers were vitally interested in the regular overseas supply of war horses and especially they demanded the bahri horses or the best quality of horses from Arabia, Egypt and Persia. These war horses were fit for their royal stables and it also strengthened their cavalry in the army. The hostilities between the kings in the south of Tamil

country, compelled the Nayaks to have a steady demand for such horses in order to equip their army. Thus these horses were imported to the Konkan harbours at Calicut, Quilon and Cannanore. Such trade brought economic prosperity to the Tamil society.¹²

The Portuguese expansion in the Eastern coast at Tuticorin, Kanyakumari and Rameswaram, promoted trade and also led the coastal people to convert to a new religion called Christianity and new European lingua-franca, during the period of the Nayaks, contributed towards the process of greater intermingling of cultures. The Europeans too were attracted towards the native tradition of sprinkling water on the streets and decorating them with coconut, mango leaves and plantain trees, during the occasions of child birth, marriage etc. The Sourastras too contributed lot for the growth of trade. According to Father Martin, a Jesuit Priest in his letter in 1699 A.D., wrote that the Portuguese and the Dutch merchants in the coastal region, provided, what was required for the Nayak Kingdom. Horses were imported from Ormuz, Persia and king Krishnadeva Raya purchased from there at about 13,000 horses every year. The Portuguese governor Albuquerque supplied horses to Nayak kings from the port of Goa for fabulous prices. So, in order to facilitate, smooth transportation of imported horses, and elephants, the Nayak rulers concentrated more on, laying and maintaining proper roads to Calicut, and so they also took efforts to retain their feudatory control over the king of Travancore, who assisted them in promoting internal trade. King Thirumalai Nayak had cordial relations with the Portuguese and he gave them rights to enjoy free access in the Eastern coast of the Nayak kingdom. As these Portuguese merchants were well-versed masters in navigation, ship-building and naval war tactics, and in the use of gun-power.

Conclusion

Chokkanatha Nayak and Vijayaranga Chokkanatha Nayak. The Nayak rulers undertook many relief measures such as providing free food or annadhanam, reducing tax burdens and creating employment opportunities by renovating temples and tanks. However, during the visits of these natural havocs, people suffered lot. But in other times and normal period, most of the articles needed for consumption in the country were locally produced. Thus, through benevolent measures, the Nayak Kings fostered industries, and internal trade in their kingdom. From the above facts, it is evident that the Tamil society met with transitions and transformations due to the advent of the Nayak rule and also due to their policies. The society based on tradition was still progressive due to the efforts of the Nayak rulers who devoted much time and brought multifarious activities of promotional nature. The Tamils, known for their qualities of adjustment and adaptability approved, acknowledged and accepted all the activities of the Nayak rulers. Thus the Nayaks' contribution to social upliftment, economic prosperity, artistic supremacy and so on, certainly had their own impacts and impressions in the Tamil society.¹³

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