



ANIMAL DONATIONS FOR LIGHTING PERPETUAL LAMPS GLEANED THROUGH THE INSCRIPTIONS OF VIRUDHUNAGAR DISTRICT

Maheswari.L

Assistant Professor of History

V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women (Autonomous)

Virudhunagar

E-mail: maheswari1975vnr@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

In Tamil culture the practice of lighting the lamp was one of the auspicious activity in the residential place and also in the worshipping place. In addition to that flame is a symbol of wisdom which is dispelled from the sorrows and sufferings. So lighting a lamp played a significant role in temples. The temples received numerous forms of gifts for the maintenance of perpetual lamps. Animal donations for the maintenance of the lamp was popular in the medieval period. as compared to the other charitable purposes. In majority of cases animal donations for lamp the quantity of ghee required for the lamp is clearly mentioned. The inscriptions provide insight to the number of animal donated for a lamp and the amount of ghee required for it. It throws light on the socio-economic-religious life of the people.

INTRODUCTION

During the time of worship lamps were lighted. In Tamil culture the practice of lighting the lamp was one of the auspicious activity in the residential place and also in

the worshipping place. Lighting a lamp at the beginning of a religious, cultural, social ceremony in the belief that the presence of Agni (fire) ensures success, (fire is one of the five elements that formed in the universe). Fire is identified in the form of

God Surya, for that purpose before praying and making offerings to gods and goddesses it is the custom to focus the energy through lighting a lamp. In addition to that flame is a symbol of wisdom which is dispelled from the sorrows and sufferings. So lighting lamp played a significant role in temples.¹ It is one of the 16 Upacharas (endowment) offered to the deity.²

TYPES OF LAMP

There were a different types of lamps lit in the temples. They were *Saravilakku*, *Nilavilakku*, *Kilithuttu vilakku*, *kaivilakku*, *Gajalakshmi vilakku*, *Tirumal vilakku*, *Lotus vilakku*, *crossed-vilakku*, *Sammanasu vilakku*, *Ganapathi vilakku*, *raada vilakku*, *odhimathooku*, *vilakku*, *Thoonda manivilakku*, *Koondu vilakku*, *pura (pigeon) vilakku*, *Sangili Thooku vilakku*, *Kilithooku vilakku*, *Tikpalar vilakku* (4 types), *Ashtakaja vilakku* (8 types). However among them *Nandha* (or) *Nundha* (or) *Nondha vilakku* as an odd one by its nature.³

PERPETUAL LAMPS

In many temples lamps are lit continuously as an offering to god in the belief that as long as the lamp is lit, God continues to be present and one's desires are soon fulfilled. The perpetual lamps were lit

throughout the day and night. Lamps were used to produce light continuously for a period of time using oil-based fuel source. Generally the lamps used in temples were made of metal and circular with slots for five wicks, usually only one wick was lit. It is believed that lamps should be lit in odd numbers. An even number neutralises and wastes energy. And the flame of the lamps points north and east only on festive occasions all the wicks were lit.

The inscriptions refer to the perpetual lamp as an oil lamp. The temples received numerous forms of gifts for the maintenance of perpetual lamps. Animal donations for the maintenance of the lamp was popular as compared to the other charitable purposes. It occupies almost 90% of the total donations made over to the temples. In majority of cases animal donations for lamp the quantity of ghee required for the lamp is clearly mentioned.⁴ In nandhivilakku mostly ghee is used for lighting though ghee containing lamp kindles for a short period compared with oil lamp. Ghee lamps has more capacity to attract Sattvik vibrations present in the surroundings.⁵ Oil donated by the people are mentioned in the inscription. The kings, officials, occupational, commercial guilds,

military men, village assemblies, courtesans (*devaradiyar*) and private individuals both men and women donated for the lamps.⁶ The provisions were made by the gifts of money or cattle and it was possible for two or more persons to endow a lamp jointly and apportion the merit along themselves in accordance with the share contributed to each.⁷ The donation of the cattles number was also mentioned in the inscriptions.

In the later period the motive for lit a perpetual lamp was changed, keeping a lamp alight in the temple perceived as an expiation for murder and manslaughter

during the Chola period and especially since the twelfth century. The main object of expiation was possibly to wash away the sins of the wrong doer so that he should not be made liable to future punishment. In Tamil society expiation was performed by the culprit willingly, Expiation can be supported on religious, social and ethical grounds.⁸

Along with the royal family members, the chieftains and higher officials of the State endowed perpetual lamps. The following table list out the donations.

S. No	Inscription	Donar	Donation	Reference
1	Pa[[ima'am	Nilai ku'i N'***u ka==@r Cha^kun'tha+	Sheep (100)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 192/2005. A.R.E. No. 430 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 32.
2	Pa[[ima'am	Ch'tha+k'ri P@va+	Sheep (50) Sheep (75)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 194/2005. A.R.E. Nos. 428A, 4286 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 32.
3	Pa[[ima'am	\$lanth@rk#l P'mparoor	Sheep (50)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 195/2005. A.R.E. No. 431 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 39.
4	Pa[[ima'am	A[a}}u Kalisal Ma^galathu Thacha+	Sheep(25)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 196/2005. A.R.E. No. 425 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 46.

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5	Kalluma'ai	K#ra[asi^gamuttara iya+ m'd#va+.	Cow (25)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 204/2005. A.R.E. No. 291 of 1977-78.
6	Tirutta^gal	A[a}]u N'^*u Nall@r Ki{ava+	Sheep(100)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. I I 233/2005.
7	Tiruchu{i	Ch\${a+thaga Pallavar'ya+.	Sheep (75)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 187/2005. A.R.E. No. 420 of 1907. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 79.
8	Tiruchu{i	Ki{ava+ Aru'li Ch\${'^tanka+ Prammaraya+a+a N'raya=a+ The++ava+ Uttira Ma^tiri.	Sheep (50) Sheep (75) Sheep (25)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 198/2005. A.R.E. No. 421 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 80.
9	Pa[[ima'am	Peru^che++ilaku'i P@va+ (military- officer)	Sheep (20)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 201/2005. A.R.E. No. 423 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 88.
10	Pa[[ima'am	Poliy@r N'^*u Su'uv\$r M@v#^da v#la+ Ara^ga+p\$thi	Sheep(100)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 202/2005. A.R.E. No. 426 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 90.
11	Edirk\$**ai	Va=iyach#ri òcha+ (Merchant)	Sheep (55)	V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 296/2005. A.R.E. No. 474 of 1909. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 94.
12	Tiruchu{i	Mutharaiya+	Ki'rika+}u (20) Sheep(19)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 180/2005.
13	Tirutta^gal	Mallin'^*uk'+'a+@r Ko**}a+ Ki{a+	Sheep (31)	V.D.I. Vol.II, No. 252/2005. A.R.E. No. 557 of 1922.
14	Tiruchu{i	Ko=d'+ki{ava+	Sheep (37 ½) (35 N'1)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 182/2005.
15	Tiruchu{i	K\$}}a&cha}}i ki{ava+	Sheep (87)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 181/2005.
16	õnj'r	V'='vich'ttiraya+		V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 294/2005.

17	Tirutta^gal	Ko**}a N'chiy'r	Sheep (50)	V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 254/2005. A.R.E. No. 567 of 1922.
18	Tirutta^gal	Uyyavanth'ch'=i	Sheep(13)	V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 229/2005. A.R.E. No. 560 of 1922.
19	Tirutta^gal	Name not mentioned	Cow (20)	V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 256/2005. A.R.E. No. 571 of 1922.
20	Tirutta^gal	ò*ko='i, Tirumaha[Sheep (12+13) 25	V.D.I. Vol. II, No. 231/2005. A.R.E. No. 558 of 1922.
21	Pa[[ima'am	Name not mentioned	Sheep (100)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 199/2005. A.R.E. No. 424 of 1914. S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 82.
22	Ku='alakutt@r	Vemba+p@va+ (merchant)	Sheep (25)	V.D.I. Vol. I, No. 287/2005 A.R.E. No. 337 of 1929-30 S.I.I. Vol. XIV, No. 44

KINDS OF DONATION

To ensure the regular supply of fuel for lighting the lamps, various provisions and donations were made. Generally ghee was used for lighting the lamp. For providing regular supply of ghee cows, sheep and buffaloes were donated. Rich persons donated land, gold and *kasu*. The thirty eight inscriptions in Virudhunagar District give details about perpetual lamp. Among the thirty eight inscriptions nineteen inscription refers to the donations in terms of sheep and two in terms of cow.

The distribution of various items for perpetual lamps :

S. No.	Cattles	Numbers in inscriptions
1	Sheep	19
2	Cows	2

The above table shows that for the perpetual lamp they mainly donated cattles.

SHEEP

Sheep were preferred mainly for providing ghee for the perpetual lamps. Hence as already noted 50% of the available inscriptions pertained to the donations of

sheep. Among the thirty eight inscriptions which deal with the donation to perpetual lamps, nineteen records the donations of sheep. Cholas inscription at Tiruchulial mentions 37 ½ sheep was donated for the perpetual lamp and it mentions thirty five sheeps used for *vettikku* for the welfare of the public and do the work without payment) and this asset (ie) sheep income (through the sheep) was utilised only for his personal use it was deed (*Attaku*) for this deed *Attaku Muppathanjil Nal* sheep only utilised.⁹ In the inscriptions the sheeps are mentioned as “*Chava Muvaperadu*” (undying and unaging sheep). Cholanthalai konda virapandya’s

pallimadam inscription mentions about *Chava muva peradu*, and this donation was supervised under local persons guidance it was mentioned in the name *punnai*.¹⁰ It suggests that the specific number of sheep would be maintained by replacing the old and dead sheep with young and live ones.

The practice of giving sheep as donation for the perpetual lamp was prevalent from the period of Arikesari Parankusa Maravarman alias Maran Sadaiyan the Early Pandya ruler.¹¹ A large number of donations of sheep was records in reign of Early Pandyas.

Sl. No.	Ruler	Names of Places	Sheep	Amount of Ghee	Reference
1	Maran Sadayan	Pallimadam	100	one nali ghee (per month)	A.R.E. No. 430 of 1914.
2	Maran Sadayan	Pallimadam	75	not mention	V.D.I. Vol. I. 194/2005.
3	Maran Sadayan	Pallimadam	50	five nali ghee per month	A.R.E. No. 431 of 1914.
4	Maran Sadayan	Tiruchuli	25	-	V.D.I. Vol. I. 196/2005.
5	Varaguna Pandya	Tiruchuli	100	-	V.D.I. Vol. II. 233/2005.
6	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Tiruchuli	75	Cholanthaka Narayan one nali ghee	V.D.I. Vol. I. 1997/2005.
7	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Tiruchuli	25	one Alakku ghee	V.D.I. Vol. I. 198/2005.
8	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Pallimadam	100	-	V.D.I. Vol. I. 199/2005.

9	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Pallimadam	20	Cholanthaka Nali three nali ghee (per month)	S.I.I. Vol. XIV. No. 88.
10	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Pallimadam	100	Alakku ghee	V.D.I. Vol. I. 202/2000. A.R.E. No. 426 of 1914 S.I.I. Vol. XIV. No. 90.
11	Cholan Thalaikonda Vira Pandya	Edirkottai	55	-	V.D.I. Vol. II. 296/2005.
12	Early Pandyas	Tiruchuli	19	Ulakku ghee	V.D.I. Vol. I. 180/2005.
13	Parantaka Chola	Tiruttangal	31	-	V.D.I. Vol. II. 252/2005.
14	Cholas	Tiruchuli	37 1/2	-	V.D.I. Vol. I. 182/2005.
15	Cholas	Tiruchuli	8	Ulakku ghee	V.D.I. Vol. I. 181/2005.
16	Jatavarman Sundara Chola Pandya	Kundalakuttur	25	-	A.R.E. No. 337 of 1929-30 S.I.I. Vol. XIV. No. 44.
17	Kulasekara	Tiruttangal	50	ulakku ghee	A.R.E. No. 567 of 1922.
18	Kulasekara	Tiruttangal	25	Nali Alakku (per month)	A.R.E. No. 569 of 1922.
19	Jatavarman Kulasekaran	Tiruttangal	25	daily Alakku ghee	A.R.E. No. 558 of 1922.

From the above mentioned details ghee was donated to the temple in a different measurement for perpetual lamps.

Among the nineteen donations, eleven belonged to the Early Pandyan, three to the Chola period, one belonged to Chola-Pandya viceroy period and the remaining three to the Later Pandyas. The Early Pandya inscriptions are available in Pallimadam and Tiruchuli alone. Most of the inscriptions belonged to Vira Pandya. During the reign of Vira Pandya two

measurements had the name Cholanthaka Narayan and Cholantaka Nali which denote his victory over the cholas.

COWS

Cows are considered holy by Hindus. The cow products-milk, butter and ghee are used much in temple rituals. Tiruchuliyal inscription of Early Pandyas give details about 20 *kidarai kanru* (cows) grant for one *ulakku* ghee.¹² Tiruttangal inscription of Kulasekara give details about cow grant and

for (20) cow grant one *ulakku* ghee was provided per month.¹³ Thus generally 20 cows were donated for supplying one *ulakku* of ghee for lighting a perpetual lamp.

SAFEGUARDS OF THE DONATION

To safeguard the grant given for the perpetual lamp the temple authorities, and some notable persons were appointed to protect the grants. Sometimes military generals were appointed as a *punnai*. Cholan Thalaikonda Virapandya's Pallimadam inscription mentions the names of the military generals. At the sametime punishment was also mention in the inscription, if the perpetual lamp was not properly lighted. Srivallabha's Rajapalayam inscription reveals if the perpetual lamp was not properly lighted the sabha had to pay a fine of 30 *panam*, and lighted extra one lamp.

ASSESSMENT

The inscriptions pertaining to perpetual lamps are scattered throughout the Virudhunagar District. The gifts of the temple indicates the prosperity of the region in which the economy was chiefly agricultural and pastoral. B. Ananthi says, "the king and temple enriched themselves with the endowment of cow or sheep. But

this also probably had a negative side. Instead of investing the acquired wealth productively, it was used to strengthen the temple structure. Thus the problems of recurring drought famines and poverty remained relatively unattended to."

Perpetual lamps were donated not only to in the Hindu temples but also the Jain temples. The people gave lavish donation to them, that denotes their tolerative nature to religion. The last days of the Early Pandya kingdom witnessed invasion. Hence army regiments were stationed in important cities. The commanders of the army became custodians of the donations of the temples along with the local assemblies.

Donation to the perpetual lamp involve the common man also in the temple service. These animal donations led to the appointment of more temple servants for rearing the animals and preparing ghee regularly in a fixed amount. Hence temple became an employer and played a significant role in the economy of the locality.

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