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The Role of the Elite Women in the Economic Processes of South India: A Case Study of Pallava Elite Women

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Abstract

The condition and role of women in ancient and early medieval India have been analyzed by several scholars and historians throughout the nineteenth century. These studies show that the women of the upper classes and castes have freedom of their own kind as compared to other sections of society. They depicted women ruling over the large kingdoms as the queen regents and, in some cases, as sole rulers. However, most of these studies are confined to the social status of women and fail to mention their role in the economy in depth. According to most historians, India faced an economic crisis during the early medieval times, and most of the urban economic processes merged with the rural landscape, where the process of donations and endowments played a significant role. In the early part of this donation process, male members of society actively participated with their wealth. However, after the sixth and seventh centuries, elite women, such as queens, princesses, priestesses, and the wives of merchants, also began to donate movable goods and land for the welfare of newly established religious institutions. Some of these institutions were built by their own relatives, which suggests that some were located near their residences, making their donations a vital part of the local economy. The donations of gold created a new economic system in early medieval India, where a particular gender of society emerged as a supplier of movable wealth in the market with the help of mercantile organizations, and also helped in the expansion of agricultural surplus through land endowments. This chapter explores this further through examples of inscriptions from the Pallava kingdom in South India.

Keywords: Ancient, Early Medieval, Pallava, Elite, Donation, Gold, Economy.

Introduction

In Indian history, the role of women has been marginalised by the mainstream historiography. The main focus of historians was always the nobles and working males who were kings, feudal lords, merchants, traders, shopkeepers, officers, etc. Though some works, such as those by Anjali Verma¹, Kumkum Roy²,

¹ Verma, A. (2018). *Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs*. India: Taylor & Francis.

² Roy, Kumkum (2024). *Women in Early Indian Societies*. New Delhi: Manohar Publication.

Vijay Laxmi Singh¹ and Malini Adiga², address the condition of women in ancient and early medieval India, their neglect of the economic aspect creates a gap in women's history. This chapter explores these gaps by analyzing the case study through records of the Pallava kingdom, which ruled over the modern regions of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh. As mentioned above, the Pallava dynasty of South India ruled parts of present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh from the 3rd to the 9th century CE and played a significant role in the cultural, artistic, and political history of the region.³ Most aspects of their history are known from inscriptions, as these inscriptions give us snippets of the contemporary social and economic life of the Pallava kingdom in detail.⁴ Similarly, specific information about Pallava women and their lives is limited, as historical records from this period often focus more on the ruling kings and political events rather than the daily lives of ordinary people, including women. However, some of these selective records depict women as strong holders of property and wealth of their times. These women also participated in the donation process, in which a source of income was provided to the temples and priests for economic expenses. Likewise, the Pallava epigraphic records show women as the owners and donors of land grants. Apart from the land grants, some records also show that women during the Pallava period donated substantial amounts of gold to various temples and sects. These temples also received animals and cattle as donations from various individuals, which also included women of the elite class of the society, as recorded in the inscriptions.

The first type of such records is about the donation of gold to the temples of present-day South India. The Sattamangalam inscription of the time of Nandivaraman II is the earliest among the records of women's gold donations.⁵ The date of this record is 787 CE. According to the record, Puṇḍa Mūppā, the daughter of the Jaina Ascetic of Vilukkam, donated 17 Kaḷaṅcu of gold for the supply of 1 Ulakku of rice daily at the rate of one ulakku rice per Kaḷaṅcu of gold, upon the condition that the supply had to reach the Paḷḷi (Jain Temple) every morning to feed people, and the ūrār was agreed to protect the deed. The Kilur Inscription of the time of Nandiverman, 813 CE, is the second record that contains details of gold donation by women.⁶ As per the record, 15 Kaḷaṅcu of gold was donated by Māṇikkattār Nakkanār, who was the mistress (Bhōgiyār) of Vāṇakōvaraiyar. The donation was intended for a perpetual lamp to God Perumanadigal at the Tiruvirattanam temple in Tirukkvalur, in

¹ Singh, V. L. (2015). *Women and Gender in Ancient India: A Study of Texts and Inscriptions*. India: Aryan Books International.

² Adiga, M. (2003). Dharmasastras, the dravidian kinship system and female inheritance in karantaka in the early medieval period (400 a.d. to 1300 a.d.). *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 64, 173–184. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44145458>.

³ Gopalan, R. (1928). *History of the Pallavas of Kanchi* by R. Gopalan. India: University of Madras.

⁴ Mahalingam, T. V. (1988). *Inscriptions of the Pallavas*. India: Indian Council of Historical Research.

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 108.

Kurukkaikkurram. It is also mentioned that a person, whose name is lost, agreed to maintain the lamp with one Uri of oil from the interest on the gift money. The third record of gold deeds is the Kaverippakkam inscription of the time of Nandivarman III, 859 CE.¹ The record says that the daughter-in-law of Ayyakki Paṅgala-Aḍigaḷ donated 5 Kaḷaṅcu of gold for the supply of oil. The ūravar of the village were witnesses and protectors of the deed, and they were also required to supply daily 1 Alakku of oil to the temple whose name is lost. The fourth record is the Kilur Inscription of Nandivarman III, 863 CE.² The record says that Konakkanar, the daughter of Māṅikkattār and the mistress of Vāṅakōvaraiyar donated 15 Kaḷaṅcu of gold for the lamp to Perumāḷ (Mahādēva) in the temple of Tiruvirattanam at Tirukkovalur in Kurukkaik Kurram of Milāḍu. The interest generated from the gold was for the supply of one Ulakku of oil daily to the temple. The Nagarattār of Tirukkovalur agreed to supply interest from the donated gold. The gold was placed under the protection of the Pan-Māhēśvaras. The gold was equal in fineness to the old Kashu for 1 lamp. According to the Tiruvannamalai inscription of the time of Nandivarman II, 863 CE, Konakkanar, the daughter of Māṅikkattār and the mistress of Vāṅakōvaraiyar, donated 15 Kaḷaṅcu of gold for the lamp to God Nāyanār at Tiruvannamalai. The Nagarattār of the same village was assigned to supply one Ulakku of oil daily from the interest on the gifted gold. The gold was of the same fineness as the Palankashu. The fifth gold donation inscription is the Tiruchchennampundi inscription of the time of Nandivarman III. The date of record is either not mentioned or lost over time. However, the details show that the record must have been from the 9th century CE. According to the record, Queen Aḍigaḷ Kaṅḍan Marampāvai donated 17 & ¼ Kaḷaṅcu of gold to God Mahādēva at Tirukkadamudi for the expenses of celebrating Māṣi-Magam festival every year. The gold was deposited with the merchant community (Aṟugaivāṅigar) of Śrikaṅṅapuram, and from this gold, they were instructed to supply the interest. The division of benefits from the interest is also given in the record. Accordingly, interest from the seven Kaḷaṅcu of gold will be used for the supply of seven Kalam of rice at the rate of one Kalam per Kaḷaṅcu, with extra benefits of five Nāli of ghee, milk, curd, and 20 tender coconuts for food offerings. The interest from the 2 Kaḷaṅcu of gold will be used for purchasing 100 scented flower garlands (Naṟum-Punuru) and Unguents (Orilai-Cānda) for 7 days of the festival, with the interest rate of ½ Kaḷaṅcu. The interest from the 1&1/2 Kaḷaṅcu of gold will be used to feed brāhamaṅas and holy men (Aḍigalmār) with 12 Nāli and 1 Uri of ghee. The remaining 7 Kaḷaṅcu of gold will be used to provide for āvi (Oblation) and 108 kalaśam of holy water, with the interest fixed as 1 & 1/3 Kaḷaṅcu at the rate of ¼ Kaḷaṅcu per year. The Tiruchchennampundi inscription of the time of Nandivarman III is another gold donation record deed that is undated. However, as mentioned above, this record

¹ *Ibid.*, No. 126.

² *Ibid.*, No. 129.

also seems to have been written during the 9th century. According to the record, the queen Aḍigaḷ Kaṇḍan Marampāvai donated 6 & ¼ Kaḷaṅcu of gold to the temple of the god Mahādēva at Tirukkadaimudi. The interesting point in this record is that the nature and amount of donations are the same as those mentioned in the previous inscription, but the rate of interest is not given in donations. The donated gold was deposited to the merchant community (Aṟugaivāṇigar) of Śrikaṇṭapuram at interest fixed at ¾ Kaḷaṅcu and 5 Mā (Mancadi), calculated at the rate of 1/8 pon per Kaḷaṅcu per year. The next important inscription is the Tiruvālaṅṅāḍu inscription of the time of Nṟpatuṅgavarman, 880 CE.¹ According to the inscription, Queen Danmakattalai, wife of Nṟpatuṅgavarman, donated 108 Kaḷaṅcu of gold to the Sabha of Perumulaiyūr, and the sabha used the interest from the gold to acquire a Brahmādēya in Kakkalūr-Nāḍu. The interest from the gold will also be used for the supply of 200 kalam of paddy per annum and 1 Alakku of ghee per day for each year to the temple of god Uḍaiyār of Tiruvālaṅṅāḍu in Paḷaiyanūr-Nāḍu. As per the next record, Tiruchchennampundi Inscription of the time of Nṟpatuṅgavarman, 887 CE, 12 Kaḷaṅcu of gold was donated by Nakkankali, daughter of Dēvanār of Śrikaṇṭapuram, to the temple of the god Perumāṇaḍigaḷ of Tirukkaḍaimuḍi.² The main purpose of this grant was to get income for burning one perpetual lamp with 1 Ulakku of ghee daily in the temple. The gold was entrusted to the temple committee (Perumāṇaḍigaḷ Vāriga) of Peruncēriyār in Śrikaṇṭapuram. The next record that shows the details of the gold donation by a woman is the Tiruvorriyur Inscription of the time of Nṟpatuṅgavarman.³ The date mentioned in the inscription is 887 CE. According to the details, Paḷiyan Piḷli, the queen of Viḍēlviḍugu-Pallavariyar of Umbala-Nāḍu, granted five Kaḷaṅcu of gold. The deed was made to provide means for 4 Nalis of well-pounded old rice by the standard of Kaṟu-Nāḷi, 1 ulakku of ghee, 1 Adukku of betel leaves, 5 areca-nuts, and 4 plantains for offerings on the day of Sankrānti on the fixed interest rate every month. The Tirukkoḍikkāval inscription of the time of Nṟpatuṅgavarman is next in the line of such records.⁴ The date given in the deed is 891 CE. According to this record, the queen Vīra-Mahādēviyar, wife of king Nṟpatuṅga, donated 50 Kaḷaṅcu of gold to the Mahādēva temple at Tirukkōḍikkāvu. The interest from the gold was set aside for daily use: two Nali of rice, one Pidi of ghee, and one Ulaakku of ghee for a lamp. The responsibility for protecting the gold rested in the Sabha of Tirukkōḍikkāvu. The next inscription is from Tiruvorriyūr, dated to the time of Kampavarman, 886 CE.⁵ As per the details, Pudi Arinḍigai, wife of Viḍēlviḍugu, granted 27 Kaḷaṅcu of gold. In this deed, the interest rate was 3 Mancadi per Kaḷaṅcu per year. This interest rate was higher than the usual rate; however, this deed was given only on the condition that

¹ *Ibid.*, No. 156.

² *Ibid.*, No. 166.

³ *Ibid.*, No. 168.

⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 200.

they would deposit two Kaḷaṅcu and ½ Mancadi of gold every 6 months in the same regnal year. The interest generated from this gold grant was for procuring well-hulled rice, 50 plantains, 10 palam of sugar, areca nuts, betel leaves, and coconut. The name of the religious institution that received the grant is not given in the record. In another interesting case, Amatti and Sappakkan, two mistresses of a man named Vayiramēgan, donated the same amount of gold each, although ten years apart. The Tiruvorriyur inscription of the time of King Aparājitavarman (889 CE) provides details of Amatti's donation.¹ She donated 30 Kaḷaṅcu of gold with the interest rate fixed at 3 Mancadi per Kaḷaṅcu per year. The grant was given for the purpose of lighting a lamp upon the condition that the person responsible would pay 2 & ½ Kaḷaṅcu of gold every 6 months as interest on the gifted gold. The protection of gold was given to Sabhaiyār of the village. Another mistress of Vayiramēgan's, Sappakkan, is mentioned in the other Tiruvorriyur inscription of the time of Aparājitavarman, which is written only ten years after the first mistress's record, 899 CE.² According to the inscription, Sappakkan donated 30 Kaḷaṅcu of gold to the temple of Mahādēva of Tiruvorriyur. As mentioned earlier, the annual interest rate given in this record is also three Mancadi per Kaḷaṅcu for lighting a lamp, upon the condition that they will pay 2 & ½ Kaḷaṅcu of gold every six months. The gold was also deposited with the village's Sabhaiyār. The same temple received a grant from Mādēvi-Aḍigaḷ, queen of Aparājita. This is recorded in the Tiruvorriyur inscription of Aparājitavarman, dated 902 CE. Mādēvi-Aḍigaḷ also donated the same amount of gold, 30 Kaḷaṅcu, to the temple, and the annual interest rate was fixed at three Mancadi per Kaḷaṅcu. The gold was given for lighting a lamp upon the condition that they would pay two & ½ Kaḷaṅcu of gold every 6 months. The protection of gold was entrusted to the Sabhaiyār of the village.

The next set of Pallava records speaks of women who donated land to build temples and cover their expenses. Among these, the first inscription dates to the seventh century and records a woman named Rangapataka, wife of a noble named Kalakala Narasimhaviṣṇu. She donated a piece of land to build a temple for lord Shiva. The next record comes from the eighth century, when a queen named Dharmamahadēvi donated ten Patti of land to the temple of lord Shiva built at her own order. The land was entrusted to three persons named Tattasivan, Dharmmakannan, and Anantagivan, with the hereditary right to perform worship and with the revenue from the land. The same record also mentions the names of 15 dancing girls (Devadasis) who also earned their livelihood from the donated land. The names of these girls were Perunangai Ponnadi, Atimani Madēvi, Kumaradi Manikkadevi, Tigaimani Gunatungi, Tigaimani Suddi, Sindadikumaradi Nangadai Aniyatitti, Muttiavvadivificadi padadi Kulakkodi, Avvadinangan mudiyakkan Sridēvi, Nankami

¹ *Ibid.*, No. 241.

² *Ibid.*, No. 242.

Madevi, Nilimanavatti dévadimanipporri Arimani, Nangunavibahuvalakami, Malalainocci Talimanikkam, Cittiranidi Nerippagi, Vinayadi avvadi Sirunangai, and Kamadi madi Tigaimani. The next inscription is from the ninth century and is known as the Chitrur plates of Nṛpatuṅgavarman.¹ It starts with the mythical and historical origins of the Pallava dynasty, through the reign of King Nṛpatuṅgavarman, and then focuses on the Bana king Paranjaya and his wife Prthivimanikka, who is described as pleasant as Ganga and the moon. The record further states that this queen of the Bana kingdom submitted a petition to her husband and the Pallava lordship regarding the donation of land in the village Prthivimahadevichaturvédimangalam (named after the queen herself), which suggests that the entire village was named after the queen's honour. The donation was made to cover the expenses of 54 priests of the temple, and they were exempted from several taxes such as such as nadalci, uratci, vatti-nali, puda-ndli, tattuk-kayam, ilappitei, idaippitci, manrupadu, taragu, tari, kiilam, nadukaval, idupokku, kallanak-kanam, and kusak-kénam. Apart from these, the priests were bestowed with several privileges, including using burnt bricks for their houses and mansions, planting coconut and palmyra trees, maintaining oil-presses, rearing famanagam, iruvéli, and Serkalunir flower-plants, etc. From the same land, 750 kadi of paddy were assigned to the main temple of the village, measured by enalikkal. The donated village was surrounded by localities called Tayandamédu, Panamattu tank, Kattuppakkam, Manaltir, and Kadumpalaiyantr water tank. The next record is a ninth-century Narttamalai inscription of king Nṛpatuṅgavarman's time.² It states that an individual named Sattan Paliyili, son of Vidélvidugu-Muttaraiyan, built a temple while his daughter Paliyili Siriyanangai, the wife of Minavan Tamiladiyaraiyan alias Pallan Anantan, gave a donation for the construction of several structures in the vicinity of the temple, including Mugamandagam (Mukha-mandapa), Isavam (Risabha), Isavak-kowil (Nandimandapa), and Balippidam (Bali-pitha) with a piece of land purchased from the kami land of three véli donating to the temple. The land was entrusted to Savaifi Cattan and his heirs, who were ordered to supply regular revenue from the land to the temple's authority. The next inscription is called the Parameśvaramaṅgalam inscription of Nṛpatuṅgavarman, which speaks about a brahmana lady called Dévacani, wife of Daṇḍiyāñkilar Pāṇḍiyakramavittar, who donated land to build the temple of lord Ganesh, with 40 kaḍi of paddy to cover the cost of food offerings and worshiping rituals.³ In the next record, which is also from the ninth century and is named the Uttaramallur inscription of Kampavarman.⁴ It speaks of a Brahman lady named Taliccini, the second wife (ilaiyal) of Sanakumara-caturvédi-Agnicitta-Sarvvakratukkal of Kumular, a member of the alum-gaṇa of Uttarameru-

¹ *Ibid.*, No. 152.

² *Ibid.*, No. 154.

³ *Ibid.*, No. 159.

⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 199.

caturvédimangalam, who bought two pieces of land with money from her dowry and then donated the land for the expenses of the temple built by her husband.

These records are strong evidence of women's control over movable and landed properties and the economy of their times. The gold donation records indicate that to donate such an amount of gold, they had to possess personal wealth. They obviously bought the gold first or inherited it. This shows that elite women enjoyed some degree of financial independence. The inscriptions show that the responsibility of covering the expenses of the temple through the gold granted was given to the Nagarattār, who was a member of the merchant group, as evidenced by epigraphical sources. This reference suggests that women had their personal connections within the different merchant groups, and they likely participated in the affairs of these groups. The rates of interest on gold were also different sometimes, pointing to the interference of women in the market and economy of the time. The land donations records, which are dated from the sixth and seventh centuries, also give a good glimpse of the lands held by such women. The land holdings were not confined to the women of royal families. In some cases, wives of merchants and priests also contributed to the economic process. As mentioned earlier, a woman of the priest bought and donated land to a temple through her dowry money, which suggests that they were somehow independent to use the money according to their interests. Some of these lands were bought by them while some were inherited through the male members of the family, which suggests that among the upper castes and classes, women were also entitled to have family estates and properties. However, there were some restrictions in the inheritance laws, although not strong enough, which could have stopped their participation in economic activities. In both donations, the village committee of Sabha was entitled and entrusted with the process of extracting taxes and providing to the rightful done on the order of kings or feudal lords. Their indirect partnership with the merchant bodies also paved the way for the inclusion of the market system in the rural area, which resulted in the creation of rural markets called haṭṭa (modern-day Hata markets). Soon, these markets helped in the development of the local economy, which, through the help of newly established temples and their networks, indulged in the long-distance trade. These examples present elite women as wealthy possessors and donors of gold as interest-bearing capital, capable of intervening in the financial system of their times.

