

ESTD. 2010

Crossian Resonance

A Multidisciplinary Research Journal

(A Refereed Biannual Published in June and December)

ISSN 0976-5417

Vol. 9 No. 1 June 2018



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Women's Sacrifice during the Chola Period

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ABSTRACT

In the history of Tamil country particularly in the Chola period we have a number of evidences to illustrate the system of sacrificing the life of women. As women were subordinate to men, they had no voice and their will and wishes were also buried by the society. At this juncture they were forced to sacrifice their lives too for others in the form of Sati or Self immolation and Devadasi system by the Chola society. This paper analyses some of the aspects of the system of sacrificing the life of women that prevailed in the Chola period.

Sati or Self Immolation and Devadasi system were the most inhuman system which prevailed during the period of the Cholas. Sati was done by women on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Similarly in devadasi system women were compelled to dedicate their life for Deva or God. In short both systems were the kinds of sacrificing the lives of women for others. These two pathetic and horrible systems prevailed in the Chola period in Tamil Nadu. This paper illustrates the details of the above mentioned systems.

◆ To Sacrifice the life for their Husbands

Self immolation of woman on the funeral pyre of her husband was a common affair in the Chola period. When her husband was dead she should remain a widow or she should commit sati. Performance of sati was considered as a virtuous act of the Cholas. Though women were separated by the men folk in all aspects and so their aspirations were buried within the four walls of kitchen. At this juncture they were forced to sacrifice their precious lives after the death of their husbands.

An inscription found at Allur mentions that sati was committed by Gangama Deviyar, the wife of Virasola Ilango Velar. Likewise the wife of the chief Virasola Ilangovel alias Parantaka Kunjara Mallan committed sati. The Tiruvalangadu inscription of Rajaraja I refers to the sati committed by his grandmother Vanavan Mahadevi. Moreover the Tiruvalangadu plates and the Tirukkoyalur inscription of Rajaraja I mentions that when Sundara Chola died in 970 A.D his wife Vanavanmahadevi, mother of Rajaraja I committed sati. An inscription of Rajadhiraja I dated in the 26th year from Brahmadesam in North Arcot district mentions that the queen Vira Mahadeviyar committed sati on the death of her husband Rajendra Chola in 1044 AD. Like that a feudatory queen Vamu committed sati after the death of

Tennattaraiyan of Malaiyur, a vassal under Kulottunga Chola I (1070 A.D.- 1120 A.D.). These events show that the denial of rights of living to women.

The woman who lives without committing sati after the death of her husband has to face torture from the relatives of the deceased husband. These widows suffered because of severe restrictions imposed on them. They were insisted to wear pure white cloth and not allowed to attend any social functions. Thus the life of the widows was worse than that of an ascetic. For instance an inscription found at the North wall of Gramchantheswara temple at Thirukoliyur in South Arcot district elaborates the tortured life of a widow. She says that she was treated as a slave of her family and was denied the right to attend all the social gatherings. By fearing the inhuman custom of Chola society and knowing the cruelty in widowhood life, they preferred sati rather than widowhood. In short here we can see that the women sacrificed her priceless lives for others.

◆ To Sacrifice the life for Divine Power

Another horrible system of sacrificing the life of women practised by the Chola society was the Devadasi system. Devadasies who dedicated themselves to the service of God or Deva were employed in the temples. They were treated as the chosen servants of God and in the Chola period they were known as the Devaradiyar. The girl to be admitted to the rank of Devadasi should not have attained puberty and they were offered for God at the age of 6 or 9. In short their lives were sacrificed by the society even without their permission.

Devadasies were considered to be the daughters of the deity (Devanar Magal). Fanning God with a fly whisk, offering kumbhadipa on special occasions, performing dances before the deity and singing formed the essential part in their daily worship. During festival times, they exhibited their artistic ability. Proficient dancers were conferred the title Talaikkoli. These dancing girls were also called kuttapillai signifying their important profession of dancing. In their old age, the devaradiyar were known as Kaliyuga Lakshmis. Thus right from childhood to ripe age they were forced to live in the temple campus for the divine power.

The institution of Devadasi prevailed earlier than King Parantaka I and continued after him. For instance the images of the dancing girls were also kept preserved in the temples. Their images were in certain important temples of Chidambaram, Tribuvanam, Tanjore etc. One of the gopurams of Chidambaram temple

contained the images of the dancing girls in 108 poses. This becomes the valuable and imperishable source about the existence of the Devadasi system in the Chola society.

The Tanjore inscription indicates the appointments of 400 Devadasies at the Brahadeswar temple of Tanjore by Rajendra Chola I. In 1119 A.D. some women were dedicated to the temple at Tiruvallam. They were also transferred from one place to another by the order of the king. For instance 400 dancing girls were transferred to the Tanjore temple from other temples. The temple also had the habit of purchasing Devadasies. In 1119 A.D., 4 women were purchased for 700 kasu to the temple at Tiruvalangadu. It happened during the reign of Rajadhiraja II. These purchased girls were known as Matha-Adimaigal and they were treated as slaves. In due course they were utilized by the men folk to quench their sexual thirst. Anyhow majority lost their colourful dreams on earth. Though it's a part of socio- religious customs, it is really a system of sacrificing the life of women in the name of divine power.

Thus from these epigraphical and literary references we know that the socio-religious customs of self- immolation and devadasi system prevailed in the Tamil country during the period of the Cholas. In short in the name of socio- religious customs from womb to tomb, women and their aspirations were buried within themselves and its zenith was the system of sacrificing their lives too for the sake of others

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