

Slavery as a Social Institution Gleaned from Tarisappalli Copper Plates

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KEYWORDS

Slavery, Institution,
Inscription, Trade,
Church.

ABSTRACT

Slavery as a universal social evil had its origins in time immemorial. Slavery was a part of the social life of Kerala society until the second half of the nineteenth century. According to the mythical story embodied in Keralolpathi, Parasurama reclaimed Kerala from the Ocean by throwing his axe. On this divine gift of the Arabian Sea, Parasurama settled the Brahmins as the lords and brought the indigenous people as cultivators and enslaved people. The story is indicative of the origin of agrestic slavery in the land. Several documents discovered from various parts of Kerala throw light on the existence of slavery in Kerala. The first inscriptional evidence of slavery as a social institution in Kerala belongs to the ninth century (AD 849). It is named the Tarisappalli Copper Plate, Syrian Christian Copper Plate, and Kollam Copper Plate. This inscription is the only document from ancient Kerala that gives proper knowledge about the existence of 'Adimakasu' or slave levy. The Venad Raja Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadikal granted certain privileges to the Nasranis or the Syrian Christians of Quilon. The institution of slavery existed among the Syrian Christians, and the origin of the slave levy can be traced from these copper plates. The Tarisappalli plates are, of course, not only crucial for the Syrian Christians of Kerala but hold an essential position in the history of Kerala because it is one of the oldest records with detailed evidence of the existence of slavery and also about the extensive trade with Arabs, Portuguese, Persians, and Jews. This article attempts to trace the institution of slavery from the early records of the Tarisappalli copper plate.

1. Introduction

'A slave' wrote Aristotle, "is a living tool, a tool which can move and talk with some amount of intelligence", and slavery is defined as the ownership and use of human property. This 'property' can be raided, tortured, or sold to the highest bidder in the market. In a judgment of the Supreme Court of the USA, a slave was defined as "a person who is wholly subjected to the will of another, one who has no freedom of action and whose person and services are wholly under the control of another and is in a state of compulsory service to another.

Slavery has existed in India as elsewhere in the world from time immemorial. In the civilization of the Indus Valley which is believed to have flourished between 2500 and 1500 BC it is assumed that there was a section of *dasa*, or *dasyu* (slaves) in the social organization of the Indus Valley people. Remains of workmen's dwellings have been discovered at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa – parallel rows of two - roomed tiny cottages at Mohenjo-Daro with a superficial area, but at Harappa considerably larger. It is believed that they were built for the *dasyu*, who were slaves. Indus Valley civilization, like most ancient cultures, also considered slavery as an adjunct to its position. These *dasyu*, might have been persons captured in battle or reduced to bondage for crime and debt.

Slavery in Kerala was indivisibly interwoven with slavery in India. Slavery has existed in India as elsewhere in the world from time immemorial. The origin of slavery in Kerala can be traced back to the Sangam age when it formed an integral part of the greater socio – cultural unit of Tamilakam. Different views prevail regarding the prevalence of slavery in the ancient Tamilakam. While V. Kanakasabha in his book *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* asserts that "slavery was ever unknown amongst the Tamils and this is strong evidence of their superior civilization in this early period. N. Subramanian affirms in his book *Sangam Polity* that slavery was known and practiced by the ancient Tamils. However, there was no evidence to prove that slavery as an institution comparable to that of the ancient Greeks or Romans, existed in the Tamilakam. Additionally, we have no reference to the purchase and sale of slaves in markets. N.Subrahmanian interprets *Urumaichurram*, an expression found in *Silappadikaram* as *Adimaittirai* meaning a cluster of *adimagal* i.e., slaves. Historians like S.Manickam, however, contented that these terms convey only a faint idea of slavery. The term *Urimaichurram* is interpreted by Manickam as *evalchurram* meaning a group of servants closely attached to the family concerned. Further *Parimelazhager*, the thirteenth or fourteenth century commentator on *Thirukural*, propounds the view that the term *adimai* means only a servant of a humble status. K. K. Pillai in his book *Tamil Literature*

as a Source Material of History, questions the actual meaning of the term *adimai* occurring in *Tolkapiyam* and *Kural*. He accepts the existence of slaves in the Sangam period. It is evident from the Sangam literature that slavery existed in that period and domestic slavery was also practiced. Sangam literature throw light on the system of slavery. The words *Adimai* and *Kudimai* in the sense of slaves is found in the ancient Tamil grammar of *Tolkappiyam Cholahikaram*, In *Porulathikaram* it is laid down that slaves and workers could be made heroes and heroines in poetical works. *Kalitogai*, refers to the crude practice of branding slaves on their chests, as war horses were branded in a later period. These Sangam literary sources were demonstrating the origin of slavery and its existence in the ancient *Tamilakam*.

There are evidences discovered from various parts of Kerala shedding light on the sale of slaves. The earliest known such document was the one dated AD 1431 from South Travancore by the famous historian S. Desivnagom Pillai. As per the document, some Vellala men and Vellattis and Pariahs were given as dowry, along with cows, paddy fields, and copper and bronze vessels. Many inscriptions, *Kolezhethu* records (written in the old Malayalam script in the 12th century), foreign notices, and documents relating to slavery in Kerala have been brought to light.

There were three categories of slaves in Kerala. The first class was those who were the properties and entirely subjected to other person by birth. They were the members of the former slave castes such as pariahs, pulayas, kuravas etc., They were doomed to be slaves till their end. They are also called as *predial slaves*. Besides heredity, there were certain other political and social factors which created a class of slaves and they formed the second category. The regular wars between the petty chieftains of Kerala were followed by the capture of the vanquished who were turned into slaves. The third class of slaves were those who sold themselves as slaves and those who sold their children during the times of intense scarcity and famine. The first class of slaves amply represents those who were characterized as *dasagathan* (inheritor or traditional slaves) and the second that of *dandadasan* (a person who reduced to bondage for crime and debt) and the third to the *udaradasa* or *baktadasa* (a person who sold himself due to dire poverty).

The earliest inscriptional evidence on slavery as a social institution in Kerala is the *Tarisappalli copper plates* of 849 AD. Issued by *Venad Raja Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadigal*, this document details the grant of certain privileges and a plot of land to the *Tarisa church* at *Kollam*. This inscription seems to be the earliest to throw light on the existence of slavery as a social institution in Kerala.

Slavery as a Social Institution in Kerala

Slavery had been considered to be a universal phenomenon that had existed throughout world history, even in India. While proving the existence of great civilization, the excavations at *Mohenjo Daro* and *Harappa* further proved the existence of the *dasas* or *dasyu* in the social structure. The term *Dasa* and *Dasyu* in Vedic literature have been translated as “slave”. *Kautilyas Arthasasthra*, *Smritis*, and the Hindu epic *Mahabharatha* suggest that the social institution of slavery existed in India by the 1st millennium CE, likely by the lifetime of *Buddha*.

Kerala witnessed the growth of Buddhism and Jainism before the early years of the Christian era. Even though *Buddha* criticized caste and varna systems, he never opposed slavery. As a result, Buddhism supported both money lending and slave ownership, and birth-based discrimination were not discouraged. Jainism, too, was not far from the Buddhist approach. However, most historians do not agree that slavery existed in Kerala throughout the early years of the Christian era. They were of the opinion that the ancient inhabitants were free men with their own government. Even though they may have been socially categorized based on primary social functions, the ancient society may have had some form of division of labor that governed the daily lives of the people and ensured that whatever they produced was for the benefit of the community. There was only a classification of men based on primary social functions. The caste system had not taken full shape. There was a large measure of social freedom and equality and communal barriers were not very rigid. The evils of untouchability and unapproachability were unknown.

The caste system in India coincided with the entrance of the Aryans, who also brought about the dissolution of the prehistoric social structure and the rise of slavery. Therefore, only the whole context of Indian history and the arrival of the Aryans on the South Indian peninsula could be used to interpret slavery in Kerala. By the fifth century AD, the slow and steady process of Aryan penetration had profoundly changed the society, by creating the barrier of untouchability and slavery and dividing society along occupational and ritual lines. As a result of the Aryan invasion and the breakdown of prehistoric society, a class-caste system emerged in Kerala with

aggressive slavery as one of its distinct features.

Tarisappalli Copper Plates

The Tarisappalli Copper Plates serve as a record of donations made to a Christian church by the Venadu Chief, Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadi, a ruler under Kulasekhara king Sthanu Ravi Perumal. The donation was in the year 849 AD. This document is the first epigraphical document from Kerala with the exact date of donation. Syrian Christian Copper Plates, Quilon Copper Plates, and Kollam Copper Plates are a few other names for Tarisappalli Copper Plates. These Copper Plates consisted of five plates with writings only on 9 sides. The facing sides of the first plate shows no writing.

The Tarisappalli was built at Kurukkenikkollam by Mar Sapir Iso. Kurukkenikkollam was the only port between Mangaluru and Kanyakumari, other than Kodungallur, to have witnessed regular maritime traffic during the period of Cera rule i.e., the present Tangasseri port at Kollam district in Kerala. In the book, 'Accounts on India and China' by Abu Zayd al – Sirafi in 851 AD, states that Kollam was an important port in the Indian Ocean trade network. Kulam, as the city is identified in this account, attracted a brisk trade with China. Kollam grew to great eminence in later times because it emerged as a major port of call in the Indian Ocean trade owing in large part to its pepper trade. From these evidences, the exact location of the Tarisappalli is at Tangasseri.

Tarisappalli Copper Plate is the first inscriptional evidence that details the presence of two trade guilds in Kerala i.e., Anchuvannom and Manigramam. The presence of Anchuvannom and Manigramam in the Copper plates indicates the extensive trade in Kollam. They are the trade guilds, which are authorised to perform several duties in trade activities. Kollam had immense commercial contact with many foreign countries even before the beginning of the Christian era. The Book of Kings in the Old Testament has the earliest mention of such a transaction. Kollam had close commercial ties with Sumerians, Babylonians, Arabs, Romans, and China. The port city of Kollam was booming due to its advantageous location on the main sea route connecting the Far East with the West. Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadikal donated land and bestowed certain privileges to the Tarisa church built by the Persian merchant Mar Sapir Iso with a vision to make Kollam a strong trading center and attract more foreign traders to Kollam. The deed authorizes the Anchuvannom and Manigramam for the protection of the granted land, its occupant, and the foreign settlers who came for trade purposes.

The copper plates which are engraved with certain donations and privileges to the church were deposited by the Bishop of Angamali in the hands of the Portuguese who settled in Cochin at the beginning of the 16th century. With the surrender of Cochin by the Portuguese to the Dutch, and later by the Dutch to the English, the Copper plates also changed hands and later were lost. Col. Macaulay, the British Resident of Travancore, who directed an immediate search for the lost copper plates, was fortunate enough to discover them in the year 1806 and he handed over to the Kottayam seminary of Syrian Christians. The deed has been viewed as two distinct grants ever since Gopinatha Rao published them in the Travancore Archaeological Series in 1916. The text was then recovered by M.R. Raghava Varier and Kesavan Veluthat in a single document in its original form. As a result of disagreements within the Malankara Syrian Church between the Marthoma and Orthodox factions, one portion of the plates is currently held by the former at the Pullattin Aramana in Tiruvalla, and the other portion by the latter at the Devalokam Aramana.

Tarisappalli copper plates are five plates with writings on nine sides only. The facing side of the first plate shows no writing. The first four copper plates are in vatteluttu script. In the second side of the first plate starts with the word Swasthi meaning all peace and states that the donation was made by the Venad ruler Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadikal in his fifth regnal year to Mar Sapir Iso who built Tarisappalli at Kurukkenikkollam. Thirteen families were attached to the church and these families were freed, on the occasion from the necessity to pay the taxes of using ankle bands for toddy tapping (talaikanam), ladder (enikanam), thaching hut (manaimeypankollumirai), wearing of gold (menippon), interest on gold loan (polippon), billeting (iravuchchoru) and using nazhi for measurement of paddy (kudanali). In the first side of the second plate, the grant places thirteen families for the service of the church of which one Vannar (washer folk), four Ezhavas, two Eruviyar (salt making folk), one Tachan (carpenter), four Vellalars as karalars along with Aladimaikal (slaves) for cultivation over the land. A large plot of land is also granted to the church with the following boundaries: Vayalkkadu in the east, sea in the west, an orchard called Toronattottam in the north. In the second side of the second plate assigned the Church authorities to collect the head price (thalaivilai) and breast price (mulaivilai) for owning male and female slaves respectively. Anchuvannom and Manigramam, the two trade guilds, were given the rights to look after the matters drawn in the grant. In the first side of the third plate, the

per capita fee on the purchase of slaves (aalkacu) or slave levy was exempted for people associated with the church. The church was authorised to collect a fee of eight Kasu for the entry and exit into the premises of the land for trade. Anchuvannom and Manigramam were to collect the additional toll on goods. In the second side of third plate, Anchuvannom and Manigramam were insisted to withhold the toll and weighting charges (tulakkuli) in case of illegal acts against them. The king's tenth share (koppadivaram) was to be collected by the palace. The grant was perpetual indicated by the expression in the plate as "as long as the world, the moon and the sun last." In the first side of the fourth plate, the ezhavas of the families made over to the church were permitted to take their carts to the markets and within the precincts of the fort and ply their trade. A similar permission was also granted to the vannars to go about their business in the market and in the fort also. Neither the Thiyamalvan nor the Madhil Nayakan nor any others were to find any fault with these people, and all the complaints against them should be tried solely by the Church people. The foreign settlers who came for trade from Arab, Persia etc., should not be accused of any misdeeds, and in case they were to be tried and punished by the churchmen only. In the second side of the fourth plate, the grant was given as attiperu Mar Sapir Iso by Venad chief Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadikal. The word peru, means what has been obtained or got possession of. The fifth or last copper plate is fragmentary. It bears on both of its sides signatures of witnesses in different scripts, namely, Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew. Twenty-six men from West Asia witnessed the grant, including eleven Arab Muslims whose names are recorded in Kufic script, ten signatures recorded in Pahlavi script and five were recorded in Hebrew script.

Tarissappalli Copper Plates: Early Records of Slavery

One of the earliest inscriptional evidence related to slavery in Kerala is Tarissappali Copper plates. These copper plates throw light on the existence of slavery as a social institution in the 9th century Kerala. The second and third plates of Tarisappali Copper plates throw light on the institution of slavery. The first line on the first side of the second plate, a group of slaves (aladimaikal) were transferred as cultivator along with the families of four ezhavas, one Vannar (washer folk), two Eruviyar (salt making folk), one Tachan (carpenter), four Vellalars for serving the Church. The sixth line on the second side of the second plate deals with the head price and breast price i.e., the fee charged for owning male and female slaves. The third line on the first side of the third plate deals with the per capita fee on the purchase of slaves i.e., alkacu.

The deed authorized the church to collect the head price (thalaikaanam) and breast price (mulaivila), which were fees imposed for owing male and female slaves respectively except the church authorities. The levy of alkacu (slave levy) need not be exacted from Christians. The grant gave permission to the church authorities to keep slaves without any taxes so they could purchase and maintain slaves according to their will. The levy of slave money is mentioned between the lines relating to the taxes levied on goods and commodities in the market. From this point it can be understood that slaves were also a commodity in the market, they were bought and sold in the market and also those who were buying slaves should have to pay per capita fee i.e., alkacu.

The first side of the second plate refers to aladimaikal or a group of slaves transferred to the church for cultivation revealing that there was a category of people who lived in the ancient Kerala society as slaves and also, they were attached to agriculture only. From this point, it is evident that agrestic slavery existed in ancient Kerala society. The specific mention that the slaves were only for cultivation on the land means that there was the absence of domestic slavery in the society. In the words of K. P. Padmanabha Menon, 'The Institution of slavery in Kerala, like all other institutions there, is attributed to Parasurama, who is said to have organized the slave caste as provision for agriculture, when he gave the country to the brahmanas. The term Cherumakkal or Cheruman, the slave class, clearly indicates the origin of agrestic slavery in Kerala, Cher means soil and Makkal means son i.e., son of the soil.' The pulaya, paraya, kuravas were generally considered as slave caste in the ancient Kerala society and they were attached to soil. So, the aladimaikal (group of slaves) mentioned in the plate will be the slave castes in ancient Kerala society i.e., pulayas, parayas, Kuravas etc.,

2. Conclusion

Inscriptions on copper plates are the most important source for reconstructing the history of ancient Kerala society. Tarisappalli copper plates are the first important inscription in Kerala of which its exact date was found. It is the only written document giving proper details about the existence of the institution of slavery in Kerala but also it proves that the institution of slavery in Kerala had its origin from time immemorial. According to the deeds in the copper plates, there was a group of people who were considered slaves in the society and they were attached to agriculture or soil. The Syrian Christians were exempted from the slave levy i.e., the Adimakasu.

From this, it is evident that the slave levy was exacted from those who kept slaves prior to the ninth century. Also the different amount of tax was paid for keeping female slaves and male slaves i.e., mulaivilai and talaivilai respectively. The very fact that the Ayyan Adikal Tiruvadikal permitted the foreign merchant Mar Sapir Iso to erect a church in the amid of their capital city Kurukkenikkollam and the land grant to the church would evidence the immense degree of toleration which the kings and people possessed in those days. But rather than religious tolerance, the king wanted to establish of long-standing trade relations with foreign countries like Arabia, Persia, China, etc., and it was necessary to develop local institutional structures that had close ties with foreign traders. Mar Sapir Iso's Tarisappalli was an institutional structure in that line and the recipient and the witnesses of the Tarisappalli grant were foreigners, who came to Kerala for maritime trade purposes. So, the Tarisappalli grant was the contract between the native ruler and the foreign merchants for a long-standing maritime trade beyond the king's gift as a donation to the church.

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