

SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN TAMIL SOCIETY OF CHOLAS

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In this chapter an attempt has been made to highlight the status of women in the Cholas society. In the medieval Ages women had a secondary role. Women's life was divided between family, marriage and religion. The women's was main concern and responsibility of the procreation. In those times, family was very big so the typical role of the woman was that to be a good wife and a good mother. During the period of the great Chola kings, women were given equal importance. Inscription and literary works prove that women were given freedom to do anything in the society. The inscriptions give many examples of women of the upper classes owning property in their own and disposing of it as they chose. The influence exerted by some of the princess of the Chola royal family on the public policy of ruling princes has already been noticed. But, in case of ordinary women, the employment of female labour in the less skilled occupation was perhaps quite as common.¹

Royal Women

Women were not placed under any restraint in their social life and activities. Women in the upper strata of the society enjoyed equal privileges with men. The queen sat on the throne along with the king and had the right to issue royal orders. The Queen of the great Chola kings had equal power with the kings.² The palace where the king and Queen lived was called as *koyil*, the *murram* (courtyard) was called *koyilpuram* and the private place where the Queen lived, was called as '*Antappuram*' (Cinema). She was praised as *Aruntati*, the embodiment of *Karpu* (chastity). They praised in the eulogy of kings and in literary works as "*Pen Perumaal*", "*Anthappura Perumaal*", and "*Anthappura Chakkravarthi*". The queens were crowned along with kings; they sat along with the king on the throne and issued orders in the assembly; they also had the right to issued orders on their own. The queen had the right to erect temples or found for the construction of temples or involve in common works of the people.³ Many women of royal lineage have done many works like construction and renovation of temples and roads, donation of land and gold, etc. It is inscribed that Kundavai Pirattiyar, the daughter of Sundra Chola Parantakan and sister of Rajaraja Chola have given many donations. Inscription mentions that Kundavai Pirattiyar built Sundarachola Vinnagar in Tanjore in memory of Alwar Seeriparantakan's father and also built a hospital at Thirumalavadi.⁴

Marriage System

Marriage is one of the most important institutions in the social life of any people. It is considered a sacred one and the union of man and woman in wedlock was viewed as a

status desired in the society. During the Chola times, marriages were conducted on auspicious days with much pomp and show. The celebration of marriage (*Vivaham* or *Kalyanam*) was considered by the Tamils as a matter of primary importance. There were formerly eight different modes of conducting marriage ceremony in Hindu Tamil culture.⁵ Early Tamil literature speaks about eight types of marriages practiced in the Tamil society. They are *Brahmana* (*Brahma*), that of gods (*Diava*), that of the *Rishis* (*Arsha*), that of the *Prajapati* (*Prajapatya*), that of the *Gandharvas* (*Gandharva*), that of the *Asuras* (*Asura*), that of the *Rakshasas* (*Rakshasa*) and that of the *Pisakas* (*Paisaca*). Of these eight forms of marriage the first four are generally approved as religious marriages and these are recognised as virtuous marriages. These four marriages are followed by Brahma rite. These marriages do possess the best qualities of men and women.⁶

Child Marriage

The Smiritis emphasize that the pre-puberty marriage is the ideal one. The age of marriage is 16 for male and 12 for girl. There are stray references about the institution of marriage in the *Ulas* of the Chola times. *Vaduvai* or *Manam* meant marriage. The Brahminical marriage involved elaborate rites and the most essential aspects of any Brahminical marriage were the *saptapati* (seven steps by the bride and the bridegroom). The tying of the *Tali* or insignia of marriage, around the bride's neck by the bridegroom. *Tali* the symbol of marriage is termed as *mangala ani*. *Tali* were considered sacred and were tied to the bride by the bridegroom on the occasion of marriage. Today also *tali* are the important symbol of married life for woman. The practice of tying the *tali* to the bride might have appeared about the time Rajaraja-I (985- 1014 C.E.) because we find inscriptional evidence of *tali* being tied to image of goddess in the temple.⁷

Polygamy

Polygamy is "the practice or condition of having more than one spouse, wife, at one time." The polygamy refers generally to multiple spouses or multiple marriages, not husbands or wives in particular. The king adopted the practice of pleasing women and princess as war confined that led to the custom of polygamy. Also to have a diplomatic relationship the rulers have married either daughter or the sisters of the country rulers and there prevailed polygamy.⁸ The Chola ruler to adopt polygamy Parantaka-I (907-955 C.E.) was not an exception and he had many wives. Kokkilanadigal was the chief queen of Parantaka-I. He was married the daughter of Paluvettarayan of Paluvur, Arumoli Nangai, Villavan Madevi, Tribhuvana Madevi, Valavan Madevi, Cholasigamani, Chola Madevi, and Tennavan Madevi. Arinjaya (956- 957 C.E.) the brother of Gandaraditha too had four wives called Kundavai, Kothai Piratty, Kalyani and Bhudhi Aditha Pidari. Sundara Chola alias Parantaka-II (957- 973 C.E.) too adopted the diplomatic matrimonial policy. He also had two wives called Parantakan Devi Amman, the daughter of a Chera king and Vanavan Madevi, the daughter of the chieftain of Tirukkovalur. Uttama Chola, the successor of Parantaka-II (970-985 C.E.), he had five wives called Bhattan Dhanatongi, Malabadi Tennavan Madevi, Virupparayar's daughter Kilanadigal and daughter of Paluvettarayan.⁹

Among the Tribhuvana Madevi was the chief queen. Panchavan Madevi, Aruran Ambalathadigal was his other wives. Rajaraja, the great (985-1014 C.E.) had many wives. Ulagamadevi alias Thanthi Sakthi Vidangi was the crowned queen. Cholamadevi, Trilogyamadevi, Panchavan Madevi, Abhimanavalli, Lada Madevi, Prithivi Madevi, Minavan Madevi, Viranaarayani, Villavan Madevi and Vanavan Madevi were his wives. Rajendra Chola wives were Mukkokilanadigal, Arinthavan Madevi, Vanavan Madevi, Viramadevi, Panchavan Madevi. Rajadhi Raja-I (1018- 1054 C.E.) had two wives Trailokkaiyamudayal and Ulagudaya Piratty.¹⁰ Arulmoli Nangai also known as Ulagamuludayal, the wife of Vira Rajendra (1063-1070 C.E.) was also recognised merely as the wife of ruler. Thiyagavalli, who became the wife of Kulottunga I (1070-1120 C.E.) and his 26th regnal year they were married. As she was hailed as Elisai Vallabhi it is obvious that she was an expert in music. Further, the queen names such as Avani Mulududayal, Tribhuvana Mudayal and Ulagudayal and they prove that they attained fame and name through the kingdom due to their position as queens. Mukkokkilanadigal, Thiyagabathagai and Neriyan Madevi were Vikrama Cholas (1118-1135 C.E.) queens. It is worth to note that in 1127 C.E. due to the death of Mukkokkilanadigal, Thiyagabathagai became the crowned queen. Kulothunga-II (C.E.1133-1150) had Thiyagavalli and Mukkokkilanadigal as his wives. Among them the later was the princess of Chedi and that exposes the diplomatic approach of the Chola monarch Kulottunga-II also. Thus, the queen of the ruler served as a means for diplomatic activities.¹¹

Women's Property

In the ancient *smritis* and '*dharma sastras* (for the most part dating back to B.C.E.200 - C.E. 400), which were the first systematic treatment of Hindu law, the question of property rights and inheritance formed one of the important aspects of civil law, with the more controversial question of women's rights also being discussed. Even the Manusmriti recognised women's property or *stridhan*, and the right of unmarried daughters to a share of the father's property. *Yajnavalkya, Katyayana and Narada* was the important jurists who, though by no means unanimous in their views, further developed and defined women's property rights. Women could acquire property in four principal ways: (i) what was given to them at the time of marriage (*adhyagni*); (ii) gifts given after marriage, either by the parents, husband or husband's family, 'through affection'-often referred to as '*saudayika*' '*pridana*' or '*pridatta*'; (iii) through inheritance, and (iv) by working.¹²

Stridhana

The dowry was given by the bride groom to the father of the bride. Instances of lands given as dowries to girls of rich and middle class are found in inscription. They money was given for the *Kanyas* was called *Stridhana*. *Stridhana* literally means a property bestowed on a lady by her parents on the occasion of her marriage. The Chola dowry system caused havocs to women and the married revived land grants called *Mahakkodai* or *Stridhanam*. Owing to their affection for the daughter the parents might have liked to give a part and sometime even the whole of the bride price to be enjoyed by her as a separate estate during her own

life time. According to Mitakashra, property of any description belonging to a woman becomes her *stridhana*, even if it be inherited by her from a male person either as a widow or as a mother.¹³

The queen Tribhuvana Madevi, wife of Uttama Chola (C.E. 973-985) had purchased lands, which were granted as *Stridhanam* to two ladies of Sembiyan Madevi *Chattuvedimangalam*. The dowry settled on a girl was not, allowed to be spent by her husband as he liked. An inscription of Vikrama Chola states, (C.E.1118-1135) one Aganangarayan of Mangainallur had to give his wife some of his own property for having spent away the proceeds of the dowry which he had received.¹⁴

Sati System

The meaning of the word '*Sati*' in course of time changed from 'virtuous wife' to self-immolating widow.i.e, the widow entering her husband's funeral pyre. The earliest reference to *Sati* in the Tamil society is traced to a funeral hymn in the Rig Veda. The Sangam Tamil literature furnishes historical evidence for the prevalence of *Sati* in the Tamil society. The word '*Sati*' occurs in that literature; its equivalents in Tamil '*tippaidal*', '*tikkulittal*'. *Sati* means in Tamil *udankattai erudal or tidppaidal*, in general, it means self-immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. This evil practice existed in Chola period. Tolkappiyam mentions a *thinai* called *kanchi* the theme of which is the impermanence of life. It has a subdivision under the caption *palai nilai* (state of deprivation) which deals with glories of *Sati*. Manimekalai states that *Sati* was worshipped as a great woman and a stone was erected in her memory.¹⁵ The Tiruvalangadu plates and Tirukkivilur inscription mention the case of Vanavan Madevi, the queen of Sundara Chola, ended her life in flames when her husband died in C.E. 973. The mother of Rajaraja I committed sati. It was evident that his was considered as her meritorious act that led her daughter Kundavai to set her mother's image in the Tanjore temple. She also presented jewels to provide for its worship. In the reign of Parantaka Chola I, Gangamadeviyar, the wife of Kodumbalur feudatory King Virasola Ilangovelan committed *Sati*. She was burning herself along with her husband. She endowed a lamp to temple before entered the fire. Rajendra Chola I died in C.E.1044 Viramadevi, one of his wives committed *Sati*.¹⁶

During the reign of Virarajendra Choladeva, another instance of sati draws our attention. After the death of the feudatory king named Rajarajamalayakularasan, his wife committed sati. A declaration was made by a woman before committing *Sati*. She averred that if she lived after death of her husband, she would become the slave of co-wives. If she did not die, those who gathered there threw her into the fire and killed. For the instances of three women were among the nobility and the common folk committing *Sati* in Mysore country. In C.E.1057 a man killed a relative of the king in a wrestling contest, and was sentenced to death, his wife Dekabbe, the daughter of a chieftain of Nunganad, followed him violent opposition from her parents, and the story is recorded in the form of pathetic Kannada poem in *Kavya* style.¹⁷ In C.E.1068 the reign of Virarajendra from South Arcot inscription mentioned the women *avars* that if she lived after the death of her husband, she

should become the slaves of the other wives of her husband and utters imprecations against those who seek to persuade her to refrain from immolating herself. The glorification of *Sati* in essence is deifying, enshrining and worshipping the widow suicide. The entire process of glorification smacks of brain-washing of the Hindu women folk so as to induce them to believe in the spiritual benefits of suicide. The belief that the very sight of a prospective sati would bring blessing to the onlookers adds strength to the customs of widow burning in the Thanjavur region.¹⁸

Marco Polo who travelled in Tamil Nadu at the close of the 13th century confirms the prevalence of *Sati* in Tamil Nadu and says that women who performed sati were held high esteem. K.K.Pillay, however asserts that *Sati* was totally absent in Tamil society. K.A.Nilakanta Sastri says that "*Sati* was not unknown, especially among the upper classes, but by no means common". His statement relates to the medieval period in South India. A.L.Basham attributes the act of sati to poverty and the suffering of widow in general. Venkatesan suggests, "If poverty were the only reason for *Sati*, there are more comfortable ways of ending one's own life". *Sati* was encouraged by the upper strata society. The relatives of the deceased encouraged *Sati* for they wanted to inherit the dead man's property. Another reason was that women were not economically independent. The death of the husband rendered the women totally dependent on others for her living.¹⁹

Athikarichchi (Women Officer)

Not only as palace maids, had women also worked as government officials and village officers. These women were called as "*Athikarichchi*". During the Chola rule, women worked in special position as "*Athikarichchi*", feminine form of *Athikari* meaning officer. An inscription mentions that Nambirattiyar Buvana Muluthudaiyar *Athikarichchi* and another *Athikarichchi* have donated land and 90 goats respectively for the lighting of temple. The *Athikarichchi* were under the control of the Queen's. The name *Athikarichchi* was also mentioned in the wife of *Athikari*.²⁰ The *Athikarichchi* gifted only lamp as gifts to the temples. The women who as worked *Athikarichchi* were also mentioned the inscriptions as '*pendier pandaram*'. It was one of the evidence of the women of working cadre as an '*Athikari*'. An inscription in Thirumancheri at Mayavaram, mentions that one *kitchen servant* (female) donated lamp to the God Parameswarar. This woman was mentioned in the inscription as Kitchen servant (*Maddaipalli Pendatti*). The *Maddaipalli pendatti* was called *pen vallaiyal* (women servant).²¹

Talicheripendukal

Inscription mention that during the Chola ruled, many women who specialized in music, dance and drama performed such as '*Talicheri pendukal, Thaliyalar, Taliyilār, Patiyilār, Valiyilār, Tevaradiyar, Koyirpirakkar Talaikoligal*'. They lived in temples; *Devaradiyars* served to God, Dancing girl- best dancer, *Pathiliyar*-unmarried. Women who depend upon the temple for their living were commonly called as '*Talicheri pendir*'. In Tanjore *Peruvudaiyar* temple inscriptions mentions that Rajaraja I have invited nearly 400 *Devaradiyars* who specialized in all arts form to Tanjore, and allotted a piece of land and a house in the row of houses in

the north-south streets of Rajarajeswaram. That street was called 'Talicheri'. Inscriptions of Thirukoviloor Thiruveerataneswarar temple during the period of Rajaraja I record that 32 drama women worked in that temple.²² Historians explain that women who work for the temple and live around the temple were called 'Talicheri Pendukal'; those who serve God were called *Devaradiyars*; those who specialize in dance were called 'Nadaga Kanigaiyar', and those who do not marry were called 'Pathiyilar'. Inscriptions such as preparations for the *Pathiyilar* to dance when Thiruthirai is opened and only then *devaradiyars* were to dance when screen opens during the procession of god in Nootrukai mandapam of Thiruvathigai show that there were division such as *Pathiyilar* and *Devaradiyars* among the *Talicheri Pendir*. *Thaliyilar* were also called as *Devaradiyars*. During the period Imperial Chola they were called *Devaradiyar*; they enjoyed the help and patronage of the kings and rich. *Devaradiyars* performed many works such as piercing oneself with needles for god, washing the floors, cleaning the rice used for preparing food and making flower gardens. Some of these would chant holy hymns of *Devaram* and *Thiruvāsakam* while some others were experts in music, dance or drama. The inscriptions of Kulottunga III in Thiruvannamalai stand testimony to this.²³

Temple Slaves

Few of the sale deeds recorded in the inscriptions are sale of human beings to temples. Sometimes they were voluntary; two ladies sold themselves with their dependants and their relatives to a temple in the Thanjavur district; in these instances, the religious motive must have been more dominant than the economic. When a group of six persons were sold to the some temple for thirteen *kasus* by another person, it was neither voluntary nor the religious. There is another sale of eight persons recorded in the same place some years before, the price not being stated. All these inscriptions are dated in the regnal years of an unknown Chola king. In 948 C.E. a *madhyastha* of the village of Nandivarman-mankalam presented to the temple of Vayalur (Tiruccirappalli district) three women to sing *Tirupatiyam* and serve as *Kavarippina* (chauri-bearers) to God Parameśvara.²⁴

Another record of the reign of Rajaraja I from Tiruvadana (Chingleput), dated in C.E.1002, states twelve families of fishermen (*pattinavar*) were dedicated to the temple of Śri Varahadeva at the instance of two officials serving in the locality as *nadukankatci* and *naduvakai*. The families of the twelve persons had each to pay out of their income from weaving and fishing, $\frac{3}{4}$ *kalancu* of gold, and to assist in the celebration of two annual festivals in the temple; one of them being of seven days' duration and ending with the day of *Sadaiyam* in the month of *Avani*, the day of the king's nativity. The *sabha* and the *ur* of Tiruvatantai undertook to hold them and their descendants strictly to their obligations.²⁵

Untouchability

Twenty-ninth regnal year and engraved on stone walls of the temple describe the grant by Rajaraja I (1014 C.E.) of the revenue from 40 villages in Chola *mandalam*, the heartland of the Chola Empire. *Cheri* in Tamil means 'street' or 'residential area', and the relative participle *tinda* means 'untouchable'. *Tinda-cheri* as a whole, therefore, means the

residential area of the untouchables. Apart from references to some particular communities which are thought to be those of untouchables, this usage of *tinda-cheri* in the inscriptions of Rajaraja I seems to be one of the very few 'direct' references to 'untouchables' or 'untouchability' in Tamil inscriptions. These inscriptions also give mention to *parai-cheri* as another residential area in a village.²⁶ There is another rare reference to untouchables in an inscription of 1028 C.E. in the reign of Rajendra I found at Bahur near Pondicherry. In this inscription of a Brahmin settlement (*chaturvedimahgalam*), it was decided that all of the local cultivators (*payir-cheyvār*), except the *tindadar* or untouchables, should contribute some compulsory labour annually for the desalting of the village tank.²⁷

The Tiruvottur inscription mentions that *Paraiyas* immediately after *Panar* (bardic singers) and just before *Chekkiliyar* (leather workers). While we find further above the *Panar* the names of *Vedar* (hunters), *Uvachchar* (drummers), *Manradi* (herders), *Siva-brahmanar* (temple priests), *Kaikkolar* (weavers), *Vanigar* (merchants), *Chettigal* (merchants) and others in ascending order, *Irular* (a tribe) is the last *jati* below the *Chekkiliyar*. Therefore ascertain that the social position of *Paraiya* lay close to the bottom in the thirteenth century. Another inscription from Tirukkalukkundram in Chingleput District records the sale of land (three and odd *veli*), houses and slaves. Among the slaves there were three *Vellalas* and 16 *Paraiyas*. In the latter case, the name of only their representative was given. While in the case of Tiruppalatturai inscription it seems impossible for seven *Pulaiyas* to cultivate by themselves the land of nine and strange *veli* it may have been possible in the case of the Tirukkalukkundram inscription for 16 *Paraiyas* to cultivate the three and strange *veli* of land. The *Pulaiyas* and *Paraiyas* were appearing in to have been engaged not in leather working but in cultivation or in some other agricultural labour.²⁸ *Paraiyas* and *Pulaiyas* were made slaves (*adimai*) and transferred from one owner to another, though *Vellalas* were also transferred as slaves. By using the name of the women of the degraded nature of the castes are also revealed. The high caste people always avoided to give their daughters in marriage to low caste people. They refused to give their daughter to the *pariah* who gathers grass for the horse. As a punishment the accused repented that for his deeds he will carry the chapel of the *Chakkili* and will take *tambulam* from him.²⁹ Thus, having contact with low class people was considered a despicable act.

The study of position of women in the society enables to arrive some conclusion. Although Tamil Society was patriarchal, the women of medieval period were able to maintain their honour and social status by involving in various charitable as well as welfare activities. There prevailed few code of conduct relating to their Marriage, Stridhana, *Devadasis*, and *Sati*. However, comparatively in the medieval period they enjoyed more freedom and rights. Agriculture the glorious profession which pre dominated all the other activities was liked with different aspects of life in Chola period. Women also played a considerable role in the promotion of irrigation and agriculture. In nutshell, the different forms of social recognition of women hood in their original dignity were kept up, but spirit behind it was getting lost by the later half of the 13th century. The reason could be the influence of Islam. It is inferred women of Tamils during the medieval period had been enjoying a subordinate position as extension of the previous Pallava period. Political, social,

economic factors shackled them into everlasting subordinate position. Only after the advent of the British, their position gradually started changing for better. The kings patronized Music, Dance, Painting, Sculptures and other arts. *Ammanai*, *Kalanga* and *Kandhugam* were some of the popular games of the girls during the Chola period.

End Notes

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