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Epigraphs on Brahmadeya

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1. Introduction

The Brahmadeyas in medieval Tamilnadu were independent administrative units in the segmentary level of the state. They were individual and unique functionaries within the semi-feudal structure of the state, enjoying socio-religious, economic, education, political, administrative and judicial powers. Socially, they were the settlements meant for the Brahmanas, who as 'repositories of wisdom' represented the intellectual serenity of the day. They, as "keepers of conscience", served as a cohesive force of the state and society in one way or the other. Religiously, they were the centres of learning of Vedic, Brahmanic, Itihasic and Puranic commentaries. In recognition of their services to the state and society, they were granted *brahmadeyas* for their maintenance. The accruing income these grants went a long way in keeping the Brahmanas from all economic maladies. These land grants played a vital role in deciding the economic structure of the society and thereby played a key role in shaping the economic condition of the state.

By their religious and economic powers, privileges and functions, Brahmanas of the medieval days had exerted a high degree of influence on the state. Educationally, *brahmadeyas* continued to hold an esteemed position in the society, for they maintained a high degree of excellence in learning. An education was then the 'private property of the privileged, Brahmanas derived the maximum benefit out of it and occupied exalted positions in the state as priests, purohitas, astrologers, poets, scholar, composer, commentators, commanders, counsellors and astute diplomats, and these the result of their high learning.

Politically, *brahmadeyas*, as the seats of the priestly, which no king of the medieval days could dispense with. In one way or the other, politics of the day was the basis for innumerable Brahmanic settlements in Tamilnadu. Epigraphic records register the subtle struggle between the royal authority and the priestly class, evidence being provided by the unhealthy situation that arose at the sudden death of Aditya Karikala II. Epigraphic evidence stands testimony to their gradual growth under the Pallavas and the early medieval Pandyas, their extension and esteemed position under the imperial Cholas and Pandyas, and their total decay and decline under the Vijayanagara – Nayak rule. This is evident from the subtle meaning of the terminologies such as *bramadeyas* (hereditary property right), *brahmadeyam* or *desam* (right over villages) and *brahmadanam* (mere gifts) found mentioned in these records.

Administratively, *brahmadeyas* have left a great legacy as model administrative units to be emulated many generations to come. The organization and administration of *brahmadeya sabhas*, with their various wards, their restricted membership and qualifications for representation, the conduct of business and the dispensation of justice had added a unique feature to the general administrative history of India.

The major sources of information for this study are the inscriptions. They are mostly contemporary records found in Tamil, Grantha, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. They are found engraved on the walls of temples and pillars. About 750 inscriptions are made use of in this study, though all of them are not listed of them about 250 inscriptions are available in the various temples of Rajaraja *Chaturvedimangalam* of Ambasamudram alone. The rest of the inscriptions are found in various parts of Tamilnadu. Among them quite a good number is copper-plate grants of immense value. The Thiruparankundram stone inscription also refers to the Brahmin general namely sattan Ganapathy serving under Jatila Parantaka Nedunjadayan. This shows that these Brahmin officials of the then *Pandinadu* might have existed a high degree of influence on the king, who was very much pleased to

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recognize their services by granting a large number of *brahmadeyas*. The records are very useful in understanding the tradition of the grant of *brahmadeya* in the early period and the prominent position enjoyed by them during the first Pandyan Empire. Other such inscriptions of King Jatila Parantaka Nedunjadayan recording grants of *brahmadeyas* were that found in the Subrahmanyaswami's temple they king granted a gift of 1400 kasu with the administrative bodies of the villages for meeting various annual requirements of the temple of Subrahmanyaswami. This included 11 Sabahs and 4 Urs. Thus, the picture of *brahmadeya* land grant is clear belonging to 8th century A.D.

The two inscriptions of Parantaka I of 919 A.D. and 921 A.D. provide many details about the various aspects of the organizations and administration of the Uttaramerur Sabha. The unique method of the conduct of election by *kudavolai murai* (kudabolai system) and the related details are found mentioned in them. Details about the formation of variyams, their powers and functions, the discharge of judicial functions and disqualifications of members, who had been declared to have committed trespassers, also find a place in these records.

In the successive periods innumerable inscriptions pertaining to the cholas, commencing from 1001 A.T. to 1212 A.D. are traced. They indicate the oppressive method of collection of tax arrears from the Brahmins of *brahmadeyas*.

In addition, copper-plates are also found to be of immense value in throwing beams of light on the various aspects of *brahmadeyas*. For instance, the Velvikkudi Copper-plate of Jatila Parantaka Nedunjadayan and the Talayaipuram Copper-plates of Vira Narayanam provides details of the grant of *brahmadeyas* in the Sangam, the defeat of the three Tamil monarchs at the hands the Kalabhras and the establishments of Kalabhras rule in Tamilnadu. They also refer to the Kalabhra's anti-brahmanical activities especially the closure of temples for worship, the confiscation of *brahmadeya* grants and the consequent overthrow of the Kalabhras by the Pallavas and Pandyas. The Kasakudi Copper-plate testifies to the evacuation of early tenants for the purpose of granting them to Brahmins. The Karandai Plates of Rajendra I, 1020 A.D. are of great help in knowing the purpose of the creation of an *agrahara*. This is the only copper-plate grant which records the creation of a *brahmadeyas* benefiting 1080 Brahmins.

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