

## **SOCIETY, RELIGION AND CULTURE IN THE COLONIAL ERA; CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RAJAHS OF SIVAGANGA.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Sivaganga became an independent political unit during the time of Vijaya Rangunatha Sethupathi of Ramnad in 1730. Sasivarna Thevar, the son of Periya Udaya Thevar acquired an independent state for his domain. From 1730 A.D. to 1949 in spite of battles and litigation, the rulers of Sivaganga rendered outstanding service towards the welfare of the society in various spheres such as administration, economic, social, educational, religious and cultural.

**Keywords:** Sivaganga, Zamindars, Social, Religious, Cultural, Contributions.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Sivaganga kingdom was established by Sasivarna Thevar in January 1730 and made Sivaganga as its capital. He dug the beautiful *Teppakulam* (tank) with its many bathing ghats. The magnificent *Gowri Vilasam Aranmanai* (palace) was later addition which was built by Gowri Vallaba Thevar, the first Istimirar Zamindar of Sivaganga Zamin. Sasivarna Thevar died in 1750 and his son, Muthuvaduganatha Thevar succeeded him. After the death of Muthuvaduganatha Thevar in 1772 at Kalayarkoil, Rani Velunachiyar, the wife of Muthuvaduganatha Thevar, spent seven years in exile at Virupakshi near Dindigul. The Marudhu brothers and the valiant Rani Velunachiyar led an army in person for liberating her kingdom from the clutches of the Arcot Nawab in 1780. Vellachi, the daughter of Muthuvaduganatha Thevar and Velunachiyar, was proclaimed as the Queen of Sivaganga, and the Marudhu brothers were allowed to continue as her ministers. Vengam Periya Udaya Thevar of Sakkanthi married Vellachi and assumed the title of Rajah of Sivaganga. At that time Marudhu brothers became the de-facto rulers. Their active participation in South Indian rebellion resulted their execution. Lushington, the then Collector of Tirunelveli, ordered all the *palayams* to be grouped into Zamindars and subsequently the *Poligars* were reduced to the position of Zamindars. Sivaganga Zamin occupied a prominent position in the armed struggles against the forces of the British East India Company and the Nawab of Arcot throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Yet during this turbulent period, the rulers of Sivaganga have patronised poets and musicians and being pious and

spiritually inclined, they renovated old temples, built new ones, and donated lands to churches and mosques as well. So they were secular and munificent. The rulers of Sivaganga were always, interested in the welfare of the people. Even before the establishment of British Government, they came forward with measures for the improvement of social, educational, and economical status of the people. This paper analyses the contributions of the rulers of Sivaganga in the socio-religious and cultural spheres of Sivaganga region in the Colonial era.

## **2. RELIGIOUS CONTRIBUTION**

Muthuvaduganatha Thevar, the son of Sasivarna Thevar, the first ruler of Sivaganga, installed a *Lingam* and performed *pujas* in the name of his father. Hence this *Sivalingam* is called as *Sasivarneshwarar*, and the divine consort is called *Periyanayaki Amman* in memory of his Mother, Akiladeshwari. The trustees of the temple are from the family of Sivaganga Rajahs. The trustees and members of the royal family are responsible for the conduct of rituals and temple festivals.<sup>i</sup>

The rulers of Sivaganga were very pious towards both *Saiva* and *Vaishnava* faiths of Hinduism. They donated number of villages for the maintenance of temples. Many temples were renovated and *kumbabishekam* was performed by the rulers of Sivaganga. Rani Velunachiyar enshrined Goddess Rajarajeshwari, the family deity of the Rajahs of Sivaganga and performed *pujas* after she recaptured of Sivaganga from the Nawab of Arcot, with the blessing of Sri Sirngeri Saradha peetam.<sup>ii</sup> She constructed the temple for goddess Rajarajeshwari in the north-west corner of the palace of Sivaganga.<sup>iii</sup> In the goddess Raja Rajeshwari temple there is a painting of goddess *Maguda kali* on the wall in the centre hall facing north. The rulers of Sivaganga believed that this goddess *maguda Kali* protected the crown (*magudam*) of the rulers of Sivaganga. *Dasara* festival is celebrated in this temple every year in the month of october.

Lakshmi Ammal, a brahmin widow, brought the *Lingam* from Varanasi (Banares) some time before 1852 and installed it in the temple. She performed daily *puja* from the alms collected from door to door. She also made village collection and constructed many shrines, the outer wall of the temple and other buildings. For the better maintenance the decedents of Lakshmi ammal handed over the temple to Rajah Bodhagurusami Thevar, the third Zamindar of Sivaganga, by a registered deed dated 26<sup>th</sup> February 1883.<sup>iv</sup> After the renovation of the temple, *kumbabishekam* was performed on 27 June 1883 and Rani Kathama Nachiyar constructed a *mandapam* in this temple. The rulers of Sivaganga supported Vaishnava sect of Hind religion too. Perumal temples at Thirukostiyur and Manamadurai temple are examples for this patronage. The tower of Thirukostiyur temple is called *astanga vimanam* and it has ninety six stucco sculptures depicting the incarnations and other forms of Lord Vishnu. It was from the top of this *vimana* of this temple Vaishnava saint Ramanuja propagated the secret *mantra Om Namō Narayana*” for

the salvation of the people of all castes, which learnt from his religious preceptor Thirukostiyur Nambi, under the promise that he should not impart it to others. The stucco seated statue of Sri Ramanujam is seen in face of *ashtanga vimana*. There are a number of old paintings in the sanctum walls of *astanga vimana* of the *Sowmiya Narayanan perumal* temple at Thirukostiyur. This temple is considered to be one of the 108 sacred *vaishnava* temples in India.<sup>v</sup>

Kundrakkudi is located 10 km west of Karaikudi. The temple at the top of hill at this place enshrines the image Lord Subramanya, with six faces accompanied by his vehicle peacock. This temple belonged to the hereditary trusteeship of Nattukkottai Chettiar community. It was renovated and repaired by the Marudhu brothers. They constructed a *mandapam* in front of the temple. The rulers of Sivaganga constructed many temples of goddess also such as Pagampriyal temple at Thiruvetriyur, and Kaliamma temple at Kollankudi<sup>vi</sup>. The rulers of Sivaganga granted villages and other endowments for the maintenance of the temples which were under the control of Sivaganga Samasthanam Devasthanam. The rulers of Sivaganga appointed superintendents to look after the daily *pujas*, festivals in the temples and to supervise the donated funds and gifts to the temples. H.A Watson, the collector of Sivaganga in 1925 has mentioned the commendable work of these Superintendents in his report.<sup>vii</sup>

The rulers of Sivaganga were secular minded though they were devoted to the cause of constructing temples and maintaining the existing ones. They were tolerant towards other religions and they expended strong and solid support to other religions like Islam and Christianity. Sasivarna Thevar, the first king of Sivaganga donated land and money to the Muslims for the construction of a mosque at Illayankudi called Melappallivasal. Chinna Marudhu erected a tomb for his muslim friends Sulaiman bakrie who helped in the construction of the tower Sornakaleeswara temple at Kalayarkovil<sup>viii</sup>. Gowrivallabhar, the first Zamin of Sivaganga, donated lands for Muslims for the construction of a mosque at Kizhaiyur near Sivaganga in 1814. Further he donated lands for Muslims in Puliyankulam, near Sivaganga.<sup>ix</sup>

The rulers of Sivaganga rendered help to the Christians also. At that time, Sarugani was the headquarters of the ecclesiastical district for the Roman Catholics. In 1751 Rev. Father De Rossai, an Italian, built a church at Sarugani. In 1780 Marudhu brothers donated money to the church of Sarugani for its maintenance. The donation for the maintenance of this Christian church, was recorded in a copper plate on 23 December, 1800 AD and signed by Vengam Periya Udaya Thevar, the then Zamindar of Sivaganga. In 1802, Gowri Vallabhar granted Marani village to Serveshwara church at Sarugani to maintain the church and celebrate festival.<sup>x</sup> 1909, Doraisinga Rajah, the 10<sup>th</sup> Zamindar of Sivaganga donated lands to the Swedish Christian Mission for the construction of a hospital at Tiruppathur.<sup>xi</sup> Shanmugha Rajah, the 11<sup>th</sup> Zamindar of Sivaganga donated three acres of land to the Roman Catholics for the construction of a church

in Madurai Road at Sivaganga and also donated two acres of land for CSI Christians for the construction of a church in Manamadurai road at Sivaganga<sup>xii</sup>

### **3. FESTIVALS**

The temple under the administration of the Rajahs of Sivaganga celebrated various festivals. All the temple festivals were celebrated in the presence of the Rajahs of Sivaganga. Thousands of people took part in these festivals with their kith and kin.<sup>xiii</sup> Annual festivals at Thirukoshtiyur called *theppathiruvizha*, car festivals at Kandadevi, festival in *Gowrivanayaga* temple at Sivaganga, car festival at Kalyarkovil, Silver car festival at Nattarasankottai etc., are the important festivals celebrated in Sivagangai region. *Dasara* festival was celebrated in a grand manner for the goddess *Rajarajeshwari Amman* within the palace. This festival is celebrated for ten days and during the occasion more importance was given to music, dance, drama, etc, and many school children of Sivaganga exhibited their artistic efficiency in the dance, drama, etc,<sup>xiv</sup> To maintain and to perform *pujas* in the temples, the Rajahs of Sivaganga donated many villages, and the expenditure was incurred from the profit received from these lands,<sup>xv</sup> During the festivals, people staged "*Iravukuthu*" (night drama). Some of the important plays were *Harichandran, Sathiyavan Savithri, Pavalakodi, Valli thirumanam* etc. The performance lasted the whole night. Nattarasankottai, Sivaganga and Paganeri were the important centres, where folk dances like *kavadi, karagan, oyilattam* and *poikkalkuthirai* had received special encouragement and patronage.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **4. ART AND LETTERS**

The rulers of Sivaganga knew the value of education and worth of good education and did everything to provide educational facilities to the people. It is evident from the number of schools, colleges and hostels established by them in Sivaganga for the poor and needy students who could not afford higher education. Some of these schools, which hold a place of pride even today, are the Rajah's High School, the Rajah's Elementary School and the hostel for poor students. The rulers of Sivaganga appointed Hindi, Telugu and Malayalam teachers to encourage the teaching of other languages to the students in addition to Tamil.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **5. SIVAGANGA PALACE**

The holy spring where Sasivarna Thevar, the first Rajah of Sivaganga, met his Guru Gnani Sathappiah was enlarged into a *Theppakulam*(tank). Beside this, the royal palace was built and a town was formed on 27.01.1730 (Tamil year Sowmiya-tamil month *Thai* 13 and it was named after the spring Sivaganga. Thus the tank and the palace were built by SasivarnaThevar.

The "Gowri vilasam" the palace of the Royal House of Sivaganga built at the heart of Sivaganga, the capital of modern Sivaganga district and still it stands as a historical monument and the seat

of all the past glories and heroic deeds of the Marava kings. This palace withstood so many attacks and invasions. But now it has lost its grandeur. The Gowri Vilasam is a building of later period. It was built by Padamathur Gowri Vallabha Thevar (1801-1829). The remnant part which remained in fact was the fort walls. They were 18 feet in high and 5 feet in width. The strength of the fort wall was due to the use of mortar mixed with eggs, gallnut and sugarcane juice in the construction.

The façade of the palace is fascinating and it has been built in the architectural designs of Thirumalai Nayak's time. We find traces of Rajaputana stylistic traits in the facade. On the southern side of the frontage, there is a big clock at the top which was not working for several years. If we go inside the palace, we find a broad open courtyard and once it served as the *darbar* of the kings.<sup>xviii</sup>

Originally, Raja Doraisingam Memorial College was first housed in this palace in August 1947 for a short period. It continued to function here till the completion of construction of a new college building on the southern outskirts of Sivaganga town. If we go west of the open courtyard inside the palace, we find the temple of goddess Rajarajeshwari *Amman* maintained by the royal house of Sivaganga. Inside the temple, there is a statue of Sasivarna Thevar, the first king of Sivaganga. The mural paintings here are decades old now they have been white - washed. The goddess of this temple *Rajarajeshwari* is the family deity of the kings of Sivaganga. The public are also now allowed to worship the royal deity.

There was a gold gilt *kalasa* on the top of the dome of the building in the north western corner. There was a sentry yard at the top of the dome to guard the palace. Inside we find a genealogical list of kings and Zamindars of Sivaganga with some chronological overlapping (reigning period) noted therein. There was a record office, opposite to this temple, built by Bodha Gurusamy Rajah II in 1862. In 1864 during the reign of Rani Kathama Nachiyar, the record office was transformed into an armoury. From this place, a boomerang type of a weapon known as "*Valarikambu*" and some other weapons have been collected and now kept in Madras Museum at Chennai. The throne of the kings of Sivaganga is now kept in the museum at Ramanathapuram.<sup>xix</sup>

There is a royal swimming pool on the northern side of the temple used exclusively by palace queens. The swimming pool was constructed in such way that clean every day clean water was filled into the swimming pool for queen's bath and the fresh water passed through an underground duct, which is now closed. After the queen had completed her bathing, the dirty or waste water was allowed to percolate through an outlet. There is a duct from the *Teppakulam* leading to the swimming pool for filling the water in it. This tank, built of rocky stones has facilities for playing various water games like hide and seeks.

Near the swimming pool there lies a tall building with royal balcony in which the queens were seen combing their hair after bathing. There is a marriage hall (*Kalyana Mahal*) in the south of the temple with pillars of sculptural beauty and excellence. The auspicious functions of the royal household were celebrated here.

The most famous piece of Gowri *Vilasam* palace was the Black Marble Square. This place had been the centre of amusement, entertainment, dancing, plotting, and other negotiations. There was a small hall supported by black marble stone on the back of this palace. There was a seat built of black marble stones. The kings sat on this seat and settled many civil cases arbitrarily.<sup>xx</sup>

There were many occasions when Sivaganga Zamin was pledged for debt. Periyasami alias Udayana Thevar (1883-1898) leased the Sivaganga Zamin to three Europeans RG Orr, Ryan and Stranack on 23-5 1887. The Europeans built new bungalow in Sivaganga town called 'New Palace'. They returned the Zamin to the king in 1918. DoraiSinga Rajah (1898-1941), the then king left this palace forever and occupied the European bungalow. From that day onwards, the glory and prominence of Gowri Vilasam palace began to wane.

The town of Sivaganga was formed comprising the palace with the octagonal tank on the northern side of the palace. There is a well called *nadu theppakulam* at the centre of the tank with six small wells around it. The water coming from the northern side of the tank flows in through an inlet on the north. The surplus water flowing out of the tank is taken out through two outlet channels on the southern part of the tank. The steps on the northern side of the tank known as *yanaipadi* (steps for elephants) had been used for taking the royal elephants for bathing. There are two separate bathing ghats on the southern side of the tank for men and women, whereas the ghat on the east and the west are used only by the women. There is one Hanuman temple on the northern side of the tank and there is another Vinayagar temple (Gowri Vinayakar) on the western side. Thus the *theppakulam* becomes the origin of the history of Sivaganga. Through the contribution of the rulers of Sivaganga to architecture and sculpture, we can understand their aesthetic taste which motivated them to combine beauty with utility. The massive palace of Sivaganga is a monumental example of architectural splendour of the highest order. This was the residence of the rulers of Sivaganga.<sup>xxi</sup>

Shanmugha Rajah, the Zamindar of Sivaganga established a college called Raja Doraisingan Memorial College at Sivaganga on 11 th August, 1947 in memory of his father to cater the needs of backward and poor students. To begin with, the Rajah Saheb housed it in his ancestral palace, Gowri Villasm and donated for its new building a campus of 212.65 acres of land, besides a sports pavilion and his private collection of books.<sup>xxii</sup>

Shanmuga Rajah was fascinated by the ideologies of Gandhiji and when Gandhiji died in 1948, Shanmuga Rajah named his own garden (park) opposite to the palace, after Gandhi and opened it

to the public in every birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's birth anniversary was celebrated in this park in a grand manner.

The Rajahs of Sivaganga were great patron of art and literature. During their reign, there were scholarly poets viz, Azhagiya Sitrambala Kavirayar, Amutha Kavirayar, Kulanthai Kavirayar Santhupulavar, Kavikunjara Bharathi, Muthu Kutty Pulavar, Piramanur Villiappa Pillai, Pandithamani Kathiresa Chettiar flourished in Sivaganga kingdom and they wrote the respective works *Thalasingamar, Orudhuraikovai, Maanvidudhoothu* (Sasivarnarorudhuraikovai) *Mauragirikovai, Azhagarkuruvaji, Kanmudaiyanayagpallu, panchamugalatchanam* (social and economic condition and contribution of Doraisinga Rajah) and *Manniyal siruther*<sup>xxiii</sup>. The rulers of Sivaganga patronised these poets generously. The rulers of Sivaganga gifted villages and lands to the poets for their admirable works. During the reign of Doraisinga Raja the famous poet Suthanatha Bharathiyar lived in Sivaganga. He was well versed in six languages. He wrote hundred books in Tamil, fifty books in English, two books in Telugu, three books in Sanskrit, four books in Hindi and six books in French.

## 6. CONCLUSION

From the formation of Sivaganga kingdom in 1730 till the abolition of Sivaganga Zamindari by the Act of 1949, seventeen rulers ruled Sivaganga and they rendered outstanding services in various spheres such as administration, economical, social reforms, education, religion etc, Despite of their engagement in frequent battles and frequent litigation. In spite of these distracting and disturbing situation, the rulers of Sivaganga bestowed much care and concern for the welfare of the citizens and paid careful attention to promote the socio- economic condition of the people in their domain. They were great patrons of religion, culture, art and architecture. The rulers of Sivaganga lent invaluable service to all the communities and proved themselves to be able rulers and administrators. The Rajahs of Sivaganga were highly pious and they distinguished themselves by generously giving numerous grants to temples. Even now 108 temples are under their trusteeship and Sivaganga Samasthanam Devasthanam look after and maintain these temples. In addition to this they also have built several temples during their reign. The forgoing study clearly reveals the fact that by the munificent patronage and benevolent activities, the Rajahs of Sivaganga made the society, religion and culture of their region vibrant and progressed in the much troubled colonial era.

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<sup>i</sup>pamelaG. Price, Kingship and Political practice in Colonial India, P.186

<sup>ii</sup>.Sekar. M.Veeram Vilain the Sivangangai Seemai (Semman) (T) (Kalayar Kovl 1990) P.26.

<sup>iii</sup>Palace records, Sivaganga Devasthanam, Sivaganga.

<sup>iv</sup>An inscription on the wall of Sri vishwanatha temple at Sivaganga and Copper plates also indicate the above information.

<sup>v</sup>Ibid. P.26.

<sup>vi</sup>Stalavaralaru, Sivaganga Samastham Kovilgal published by sivaganga.

<sup>vii</sup>H.A. Watson, Duties of Honorary Superintendents of temples, palace records (Sivaganga, 13 oct 1925) P.114

<sup>viii</sup>M.Balakrishnan, Viduthalai porai Thondingi vitha veera Marudhu Pandiyar (Chennai, 2005), PP.117-118.

<sup>ix</sup>Administrative Reports of Sivaganga Samastham Devasthanam (1814-15)

<sup>x</sup>Bishop House Directory, Diocess of Sivaganga 1996, Sivaganga. P.51.

<sup>xi</sup>Sivaganga Samasthanam Devasthanam records (1909-1910)

<sup>xii</sup>Ibid,

<sup>xiii</sup>SM Kamal, Seermigu Sivagangai Seemai (T) (Sivagangai, 1996) P.311.

<sup>xiv</sup> Pamela G.Price, Opeit, P.137

<sup>xv</sup>Sivaganga Samasthanam Devasthanam Reocords, Sivagangai.

<sup>xvi</sup>A.Ramasamy, Ramanathapuram District Gazatee P.429.

<sup>xvii</sup>J.Rangasamy Iyar, History of School-Rajah's High School, Magazine (1957-58) P.38.

<sup>xviii</sup>Ibid. P.12

<sup>xix</sup>Ibid PP 13-14

<sup>xx</sup>M.Balakrishnana, Mutharam, (Monthly) P.P.33-34

<sup>xxi</sup>M.Balakrishnana, A Struggle for freedom in the red soil (Sivaganga, 2011) P.7

<sup>xxii</sup>Foundation Stone, and Administrative Reports of Sivaganga Zamindari.

<sup>xxiii</sup>SM Kamal, Seermighu Sivagangai Seemai PP (264-265)