

Societal Services of Shanmuga Rajah, 11th Zamindar of Sivaganga

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ABSTRACT

Sivaganga constituted the south-east portion of the territory of Pandya Country named after early the medieval kings who ruled from Madurai. Temple inscriptions dating from the eleventh century, indicate the fact that Pandya and the Chola rulers dominated this area. Sivaganga region is well known for religious and literary tradition of the Tamils. Maran Nayanar one of the sixty-three saints was hailed from Illyankudi. Ancient poet Kaniyan Pongunranar and poetess Okkur Masathiyar hailed from Sivaganga region.

Sivaganga became an independent political unit during the time of Vijaya Ragunatha Sethupathi of Ramand in 1730 AD. Sasivarna Thevar, the son of Periya Udaya Thevar acquired an independent state for his domain. Sasivarna Thevar died in 1750 and his son Muthu Vaduganathar Thevar succeeded him. After the death of Muthu Vaduganathar Thevar in 1792 at Kalayarkovil, Velunachiyar, the wife of Muthu Vaduganatha Thevar, spent seven years in exile at Virupakshi near Dindigul. Rani Velunachiyar accompanied by Marudhu brothers entered Sivaganga and Vellachi, the daughter of Velunachiyar was proclaimed as the Queen of Sivagangai and Marudhu brothers were allowed to continue as ministers. Vengam Periya Udaya Thevar of Sakkanthi who married Vellachi, assumed the title of the Raja of Sivaganga. At that time, Marudhu brothers became de-facto rulers. Their active participation in South Indian rebellion resulted in their execution by the British. Lushinton, then collector of Thirunelveli ordered all the palayams to be grouped into zamindaries and Poligars were reduced to the position of Zamindars¹.

In 1801 Agnew proclaimed Gowri Vallabhar, a descendent of Sasivarna Thevar, the first Ruler of Sivaganga² Poligars were reduced to the status of mere tax collectors and their forts were destroyed. Sivaganga was handed over to Padamattur Gowrivallabar and it was then placed in possession of the Zamindari, and Mr. Lushington, the collector, was entrusted with the duty of reporting upon the revenues and prospectus of Sivaganga.³ On 12 September 1801, at Cholapuram, an ancient capital of Sivaganga Palayam, the coronation ceremony was held. On behalf of the British, Col. Agnew and Col. Innes were attended the function⁴. Gowri vallabhar was called as "Istimirar Zamindar", He was the first Zamindar of Sivaganga and ruled from 1801 – 1829. He died on 17th June 1829⁵. After the death of Istimirar – Zamindar Gowri Vallabha in 1829, Muthu Vaduganathar II who was the only brother of Gowri Vallabha, ascended the throne of Sivaganga Zamin. He ruled from 1830-1831. In the subsequent years from 1831 -1941, Bodha Gurusamy Thevar, Gowri Vallabha Thevar II, Rani Kathamma Nachiyar, Muthuvaduganatha Thevar III Doraisinga Thevar I, Periyasamy alias Udayana Rajah, Doraisinga Rajah II ruled over Sivaganga Zamin.⁶

Keywords: Nayanmar, Istimirar Zamindar, Marudhu Brothers, Sivaganga.

Introduction

Sivaganga in the southern part of TamilNadu played a significant role in the history of TamilNadu from prehistoric times to modern times and it has a long and continuous history. Sivaganga region took an active part in politic-socio-economic and cultural happenings of TamilNadu, it stood high and as a model in the anti-British activities during the colonial period. The rulers and leaders of Sivaganga not only constantly fought against the British but also helped and coordinated the forces working against the British suppression. The blossoming of national movement, liberal ideologies influenced by western education and thought and role of Christian missionaries in the upliftment of society greatly influenced the rulers of Sivaganga. Shanmuga Rajah, the ruler of sivaganga being learnt in the educational institutions run by the Christian missionaries and in the English college in SriLanka naturally developed a liberal mind towards the society. Besides this, Shanmuga Rajah after being close to Mahatma Gandhi showed interest in implementing many welfare programmes for the upliftment of poor in his Zamin. This paper makes an earnest attempt to highlight the various social beneficial activities carried out by Shanmuga Rajah in Sivaganga Zamin in the middle of 20th centuries.

Contribution of Shanmugha Rajah, the 11th Zamindar, to the Society

After the death of Doraisinga Rajah in 1941, his eldest son Shanmugha Rajah succeeded him. Shanmugha Rajah was born on 11th March 1925. He had his high school education at Rajah 's High School, Sivaganga and after this, he studied in St.Mary's High school in Madurai for a short period. Then he had been to Ceylon to continue his higher education there. He married Rajakumari Madhurammal Rajayee, the sister of His Highness, the Rajah of Pudukkottai.⁷

Shanmugha Rajah was a minor at that time and the court of wards took charge of the administration of the estate once again from 1941. Sri Ponnuchamy Pillai was appointed as the collector of Sivaganga. Estate was under the superintendence of the court of wards from 1941-1946.⁸ The court of wards sealed its superintendence on 12th March 1946 and handed over to Shanmuga Rajah. He took charge the administration of Sivaganga Zamindari. Munificent contributions of Shanmuga Rajah towards the society was the real benefactor.⁹

Temple Entry for Harijans

The rulers of Sivaganga were secular minded and they had no prejudice against any religion or caste. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the rulers was the amiable co-existence of the people of different religions and castes. When the government came forward for the upliftment of Harijans, Shanmugha Rajah supported the policies of the government and took measures for improving their standard of living. The Congress ministry under the leadership of C.Rajagopalachari, took up with great enthusiasm the task of removing social disabilities of the Harijans. In 1939 the Temple Entry Authorization and Indementiy Act¹⁰ was passed and Shanmugha Rajah, the Zamindar of Sivaganga enforced the Temple Entry Act immediately.¹¹

The Temple Entry Act gave the Harijans the right to entry into the temples at Madurai, Thanjavur, Palani and other places. In Sivaganga, Shanmuga Rajah, whole heartedly accepted the policy decision taken by the government of Madras presidency to permit the Harijans into the temples within the jurisdiction of the Zamin.¹² Shanmuga Rajah cordially invited the Hon'ble Minister for Public information and Harijan Welfare, V.Kurmiyya to preside over the function for allowing Harijans to enter into the temples¹³. The Minister accepted the invitation and informed the date and programme of his visit to Sivaganga.¹⁴ He was accompanied by J.Sivashanmugham pillai, the then Speaker of Madras Legislative Assembly. They toured, with Shanmugha Rajah to Manamadurai, Sivaganga, Kalayarkovil, Thirukostiyur and organized public meetings in favour of Temple Entry Act¹⁵ Afterwards Nattars and other castes of Hindus from various village surrounding of Sivaganga welcomed the spirit of social harmony engender by the rulers of Sivaganga. Many resolutions had been passed in various committees of villages like Pattamangalam, Thirukostiyur, Kandaramanickam, Manamadurai, Karaikudi, Paganeri, Natarasankottai, etc.

Shanmuga Rajah decided to open all the temples of his jurisdiction on 11th March 1947, on his 22nd birthday. Distinguished visitors and prominent leaders took part in the function and the following programmes were fixed up at the several places within the jurisdiction of Sivaganga Zamin.

Programme for Temple Entry

As there was only a short time before the date fixed for opening function, immediately all arrangements were completely carried out before 8th March 1947¹⁶. On 11 March 1947 temple entry at Manamadurai Veeralagar temple and Perumal temple. Shanmugha Rajah and his brother Subramania Rajah presided over the opening function and M.G.Mukundaraj and R.S Seshadri leading advocates of Sivaganga participated. On the same day at 9.30 A.M, 1.00 PM, at 5 PM Temple Entry was made in Sivaganga, Kalaiyarkovil, Thirukostiyur under the leadership of Shanmugha Rajah and Subramania Rajah and Siva Shanmugham Pillai, then speaker of Madras Legislative Assembly. In the following months of March and April 1947 all the temples within the jurisdiction of Sivaganga Zamindari, were opened to the Harijans.

Educational Contribution

The Royal House of Sivaganga has immortalized itself by innumerable charitable institutions. To crown all those charities, comes the establishment of the Rajah's High school in 1856, on the Indian war of Independence and the Rajah Doraisingam Memorial college in 1947 on the consummation of that struggle in the birth of free India.¹⁷

The Rajah of Sivaganga, Srimath Muthu Vijaya Ragunatha Gowri Vallabha Doraisingam Shanmugha Rajah, founded this college in memory of his father on August 11, 1947 and named it as Raja Doraisingam Memorial college. To begin with, the Rajah Saheb housed it in his ancestral palace, Gowri Vilas and donated for its new building a campus of 212-65 acres of land, besides a sports Pavilion and his private collection of books. Then minister for education in the government of Madras, Sri T.S. Avinashilingam Chettiar declared the college open and delivered the first class to the students on August 11, 1947.¹⁸

Dewan N.S. Vaidhyanatha Iyer and Sri S. Jeyaraman Iyer were successively secretaries of the College during these pioneering years¹⁹. In 1950 a reverse, destined in the sequel to upgrade and strengthen the college overcome it in the wake of zamindar abolition. Admission to the college was stopped in June 1950 but before the year was run out, the enlightened public of Sivaganga, with the blessings of the Rajah Saheb

Shanmugha Rajah and other sympathizers to the cause of learning. New Hostel building was constructed for the students of Raja Doraisingam Memorial college.²⁰

Rajah Saheb Shanmugha Rajah donated three acres of land to Thevaram, the Roman Cathelic priest, for the construction of a school in order to promote the welfare of Christians. The school is situated near the Sivaganga bus stand and it is named Raja kumarai Rajalakshmi (the daughter of Shanmuga Rajah) Middle school.²¹

Shanmugha Rajah was extremely kind and highly sympathetic towards Harijan's and poor people. He had given special attention to provide them facilities for free education. He spent a sizable portion of his income from the Zamin for this purpose. The Residential hostel, attached to Rajah's High School started in the year 1920, is an invaluable contribution to the promotion of education for the poor people in this educationally and economically backward area. The hostel is situated in the building, south of Sivaganga *teppakulam* and slowly student strength of the hostel increased considerably. The inmates were provided with accommodation, food, books, clothes etc., all free of cost. The food supplied was of very good quality. School uniform also supplied to the students of the hostel at regular intervals The inmates of the hostel could complete their school education, without any monetary help from their parents. Apart from education, the hostel students were engaged as volunteers for functions held at the high school.²²

Religious Contributions

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 like Islam and Christianity. Shanmuga Rajah of Sivaganga donated three acres land to the Roman Catholics for the construction of a church on the Madurai Road, at Sivaganga and also donated two acres land to the Protestant Christian(CSI) for the construction of a church near by Rajah Doraisingam Arts College.²³

The rulers of Sivaganga were pious under both Saiva and Vaishnava traditions of Hinduism. They donated number of villages for the maintenance of temples. Many temples were renovated and *Kumbabishegam* was performed by the rulers of Sivaganga.²⁴ In the Goddess Raja Rajeshwari temple there is a painting of goddess Magudakali on the wall in the centre hall, facing north. The rulers of sivaganga believed that the goddess Maguda Kali protect the Crown (Magudam) of the rulers of Sivaganga. Dasara festival is celebrated every year in the month of October. The goddess Raja Rajeswari was worshipped only by the royal family of Sivaganga Zamin, but Rajah Saheb, Shanmugha Rajah ordered opening of this temple to the public also.²⁵

Dasara festival was celebrated in a grand manner for the goddess Raja Rajeshwari within the palace. This festival was celebrated for ten days. During this festival more important was given to music, dance, drama, etc., and many school children of Sivaganga attended the celebration of these festivals every day. The Rulers of sivaganga had created endowments in the form of villages for the benefit of pilgrims who were on pilgrimage to Rameswaram.

Political Contribution:

Shanmugha Rajah was fascinated by the ideologies of Gandhiji. He admired Gandhiji so much that when Gandhiji visited Madurai, Shanmugha Rajah invited to stay at his bungalow, and Gandhiji agreed because he heard about the philanthropic activities rendered by him for the welfare of his people. When Gandhiji died in 1948, Shanmugha Rajah named his own garden(park) opposite to the palace, and Gandhiji's birth anniversary was celebrated every year in this park in a grand manner.

Shanmugha Rajah founded Mahatma Gandhiji Memorial Trust under his chairmanship and appointed veteran freedom fighters of Sivaganga R.Ramanuja Iyyengar and K.V.Sethuramachandran as trustees. Shanmugha Rajah pointed out in a statement that this trust was above politics. Shanmugha Rajah granted lands to Alagappa Chettiar of Karaikudi for the construction of educational institutions at Karaikudi.

The Shanmugha Rajah, the Zamindar of Sivaganga, supported the freedom fighters for the cause of Independence. Shanmugha Rajah and his brother Subramania Rajah, gave indirect help to freedom fighters of Sivaganga. They provided a printing, machine for the freedom fighters of Sivaganga to issue printed materials to the people in order to incalculable nationalism in the minds of the people of Sivaganga.²⁶

In 1946 Shanmugha Rajah convened the farmer's conference. Asaf Ali, veteran freedom fighter as Chief Guest, and K.M.Vallatharasu of PuduKottai attended this conference. When of abolition of Zamindari system was introduced by the government of India, Rajah Saheb Shanmugha Rajah acclaimed the abolition of Zamindary system.²⁷

The Zamindary of Sivaganga (estate of Sivaganga) was abolished and taken over by the government on September 1949²⁸ Along with the estate, the most of the members of administrative staff working in the

estate was surrendered to the government, retaining only the staff for running the administration of the Devasthanam and chantrams, which continued to be in the hands of the Raja Saheb Shanmugha Rajah as the heritary trustee and of S.Jeyarammayar,B.A.,B.L., was appointed the first manager of the Devasasthanam of Sivaganga.

In 1950, a reverse, destined in the sequel to upgrade and strengthen the college overcame it in the wake of zamindar abolition. Admission to the college were stopped in 1950 but before the year run out, Sri R.S.Seshdri Iyer, advocate for the Defendant appearing in person, the court delivered the following judgement, suit under section 92 to give direction that entire surplus fund of the chatrams of Sivaganga Samasthanam amounting to Rs.1,96,555/- be utilized for the RDM College to enable its management to stablise the college by erecting buildings and laboratories etc., and to give direction that a sum of Rs.35,000/- out of the income of the chatrams be annually utilized for the maintenance of the RDM College, Rajah's High School, Rajah's Elementary school and Alice Miller Girls, school, Sivaganga.²⁹

Conclusion

The royal House of Sivaganga is famous for its wide and open-handed charity. Rajah Saheb Shanmugha Rajah true to his noble blood and the generous instincts and traditions of his fore- fathers has attained still greater heights by fulfilling the long cherished dream of is Father by starting a college in his memory. It is legitimate fulfillment of the efforts in the cause of education begun a century ago by one of his fore-fathers. As Shanmuga Rajah was well aware of the fact that the people of his Zamin were socially and economically backward, he aspired and committed to transform the socio-economic situation of Sivaganga region. The ongoing study process the fact that educational background liberal thoughts and Gandhian ideology, Shanmuga Rajah made tremendous societal services for the upliftment of poor. Shanmuga Rajah's remarkable contribution in the field of School and College education fetched good results not for social transformation but also for economic transformation.

End Notes

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