



Alagar Malai: Epigraphy and religious continuity in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Alagar Malai (Azhagar Hill) in Tamil Nadu, near Madurai, poses historical, religious, as well as epigraphical, significance of vast proportion. Although it is commonly known today as an important Vaishnavite pilgrim centre and also as one of the “108 Divya Desam’s,” its earlier historical connection as a seat of monastic Jain tradition in the Sangam Age has been ascertained by archaeological as well as inscriptive findings. Alagar Hill houses inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi & Vatteluttu script from the 3rd century BCE to the 9th century CE; these describe the donations made by merchants, guild officials, as well as individuals, to set up “Jain Palli” or monastic shelters in those early times. This paper will explore the Alagar Malai’s historical development, from different literary as well as inscriptive, architectural, as well as interpretation inputs, as it stands today as a multi-layered cultural topography chronicling both “continuity and change” in ancient Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Alagar malai, azhagar kovil, tamil-brahmi inscriptions, jainism in tamil nadu, sangam age, mercantile patronage, vatteluttu script, religious continuity

Introduction

The historical linkages which are connected with sacred geographies in South Indian traditions are quite complex because it represents a region where converge the impacts of diverse theological traditions, cultures, and histories. Amongst the sacred geographies which exist at Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu is named Alagar Malai or Azhagar Hill, and it represents a comparatively important location since it marked the confluence of both ascetic and merchant traditions along with temple traditions from ancient times itself. In fact, even today, Azhagar Hills are largely connected with Vaishnavite temples named Alagar Kovil and are located within the ruins of an ancient Jain monastery.

Mention of the Tamil literary works, inscriptions, and archaeology point towards the fact that Alagar Malai was an established centre during the Sangam era. Mention of the Tamil-Brahmi epigraph, Jaina cave dwellings with stone-seats and drip arches, and mention of the merchant classes sponsoring these caves from an epigraph point towards the fact that this range had religion-economic importance right from the pre-establishment of the temple complexes in this range. The presentation topic might try and explore how Alagar Malai can be evaluated as an established centre for religious devoutness and also as an area where basics of Tamil literacy and structuring could be learnt from.

Vaishnavite Mythology of Alagar Malai

Srilatha [1] states that similarity prevails between Alagar Malai (Hill) and Azhagar Hill, and the reason for this area, geographically very close, is located near the place of worship and historic events unearthed at Madurai, an area within the state of Tamil Nadu. AZHAGAR has also been referred to within this area, which assigns this deity believed to be existing within the aforementioned area AZHAGAR HILL, stating the avatar form of God VISHNU [2]. Alagar Kovil or Alagar Temple was unearthed at the top of Alagar Malai, which once proved to be one of the favourite Vaishnavite Temples. Alagar Kovil was also referred to

within this context, which assigns devotional texts penned within the Alvars, making this area one of the 108 Divya Desams [3]. This was also coined as the most superior temple among the Vaishnavites, which referred to the manner within which the devotional texts penned within the Alvars proved to be the main stimulation within this particular community of devotees who always proved themselves to be associated within this temple for the entire time-span within existence as a Tamil Sangam, stretching within the time-span of the 6th CE and 9th CE [4].

It has been found to possess a close link with the Alagar Kovil and also other literary classics related to the Tamils, like Silappatikaram and Divya Prabandham [5]. There also exists a legend related to the Kallazhagar Temple, according to which Kallazhagar is the brother of Meenakshi. The most popular epics and tales that have been handed down the generations are related to the delayed function of Lord Vishnu during the marriage ceremony of Meenakshi, due to the increase of the Vaigai River, called the legend related to the Meenakshi Amman Temple [6]. There is another legend associated with Meenakshi Amman Temple, which has direct connections to the culture of Madurai. As it has been said in the legend, “Meenakshi Amman Temple was a huge water pond, which got filled with sand from another far-off area in order to build a temple in that particular area.” In another legend associated with this particular temple, it has been said that cow which got punish

Epigraphical and Archaeological Evidence of Jainism at Alagar Malai

Alagar Malai has great importance in religious history and also for the fact that it is of immense importance to the subject of epigraphy regarding Tamil. There are many inscriptions found at Alagar Malai, which belong to different reigns like those of the Pandya’s and the Vijayanagar Empire. The Alagar Malai inscriptions range from early Tamil/Brahmi scripts to those in Vatteluttu scripts [7].

Some of the oldest inscriptions, in Tamil-Brahmi script, date from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE and can be ascribed primarily to Jain monks. These record donations made for the construction of residences for Jain monks (called *palii* or *ayam*), shelters, and water facilities among others. The later inscriptions in the Vatteluttu script date from the 9th CE and record administrative and linguistic evolution under the rule of the Pandya dynasty^[8].

The inscription series of Alagar Malai contains important epigraphical data regarding the spread of Jainism in ancient Tamil Nadu, like similar locations such as Mangulam, Arittapatti, Muttupatti, and Siddharmalai. These epigraphs are of immense use in understanding the prevalent political, social, and religious atmosphere of the Sangam period^[9].

The unmistakable archaeological evidence of rock-cut caves, stone beds with drip ledges, water drainage channels, and natural cold-water springs indicates the presence of a Jain monastery beyond doubt. At the foot of Alagar Malai Hills, about twelve miles from Madurai city and four miles from Kidarippatti village, there was a big cave with many stone beds of varying sizes, channels for water flow, and rainwater discharge. Inside this cave lies an image of either Ajjandi or Tirthankara, adding to its Jain connection^[10].

Tamil-Brahmi Inscriptions, Donor Patronage, and Socio-Economic Data

These Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions date this cave site's conversion into a Jain *palli* back to the 2nd century BCE. Many of these inscriptions record the donors and contributors who contributed to setting up and maintaining the monastic complex. The donors mentioned include Kaninathan, Mathirai, Pongolian, Aathan, Anagan, Madirai, Uppuvanigan, Koluvanigan, Ilanjathan, Venpalli, and Aruvai Vaingan. "In fact, this collection of inscriptions points to collective patronage^[11]."

The labels consist of nine in the Alagar Malai inscription. These were read and interpreted by scholars like Subrahmanya Ayyar, Narayana Rao, and Krishna Sastri. The labels record personal names, occupational titles of places, and donations, showing rich socio-economic data^[12].

Nine Labels Summary

1. Ma [ta] ti [rai] yi po nak u la Vanaa [ta] na a t [a] na
This is referred to as Matirai, associated with modern Madurai. The name Matirai is recognized in Chola inscriptions, specifically in instances of Parantaka I Parakesari, referred to as "Matiraiyum Ilamum Konda Kop Parakesari." Ponkulan is the name of the gold trader, and Atan Atan is associated with personal names, referring to "Atan, son of Atan."

2. Ma ta ti rai Ko pa pu v an i ka

The inscription records Mattirai Koppu Vanikan from Madurai as a merchant. Koppu with Ko-p-pu as prefixes denotes a 'Flower Form Ladies Ear Ornaments at the rim of Helix', which denotes that the merchant was a trader in 'Ornaments or Luxury Merchants'.

3. Vi ya ka na ka Ti ka na

This is referred to as Viyakan Kanatikan. The name "Viyakan" seems to belong to an individual, while "Kanatika" or "Kanaatikan" is the Indian oak or timber. The inscription is thus referring to a person named "Viyakan," who was a merchant dealing in wood and oak timber.

4. Ka na ka a t[a] na m[o] ka na A ta na a ta na

This inscription refers to "Kanaja Atan makan Atan." The meaning of "Kanakkan" can be understood by an individual versed in religious philosophy or knowledge of science. This reminds me of "Nakkiran" or "Nakkirar" again, the legendary author of "Tirumurugarrupadai", who would have been "Madurai."

5. Sa pa a minsi mi ta ti

This inscription reads: Sapamisini mitti, Mitti has been deduced to be connected to *middha* (sleep) or *Mithya*, which refers back to Jain religious ideology related to spiritual notions or demi-gods.

6. Pa ni ti v ani[ks] na ne tu ma la na

This label signifies Paniti Vanikan Netumalan. "Paniti" is an adjective that means to adorn or decorate, implying that the merchant is involved in the sale of ornaments, jewels, or cosmetics. Netumalan is obviously a given name, suggesting that the title refers to an important merchant.

7. Ko lu v ani ka nay a la [ca] na ta na

This entry records Kolu Vanikan Ulacenda. Kolu stand for bar or metal, and may denote a merchant who handled metal or iron wares. Ulacenda could represent a merchant who handled iron utensils.

8. Ci ka[ru] pi ra na ta na A ni [ya] ko tu pi t uva na

This label has "Cikaru pirantan" prefixed to an indication that there was excavation at the cave. It suggests that the person or group that sponsored or excavated the cave supported the religion through this excavation and was born in a location named "Cikaru".

9. A na ka ne na

It is an incomplete inscription, and letters are missing at the end of the inscription. Although it is an incomplete inscription, it is impossible to surmise its meaning as it is a series of Alagar Malai Inscriptions.

Subrahmanya Ayyar first partially transcribed and translated the inscriptions, highlighting donors engaged in gold and grain trade. Narayana Rao later presented a more complete reading of all nine labels, which he understood as collectively constituted donations by merchant guilds (*kula*) for providing sustenance to Jain monks, building caves, and religious observances^[13].

Socio-Religious Transformation at Alagar Malai

However, apart from its religious and inscription contexts, the value of Alagar Malai is in its status as a true example of cultural continuum in which the Jain and Vaishnavite traditions merged and later the Hindu cults flourished. The adaptation of the Jain cave dwellings into one of the largest temple complexes in the Vaishnavite tradition fits the general trend in Tamil Nadu in which the ascetic dwelling spaces from the early periods were gradually incorporated into the Brahmanical cults^[14].

Another area of importance covered by the Tamil-Brahmi scripts is the involvement of merchant groups in the early Tamil social setup. The recurrence of terms such as Vanikan (Merchant), Gold merchants, Timber merchants, Iron merchants, and Ornament traders reflects the existence of a strong commercial economy during the Sangam era. They

acted as ardent devotees of Jains, supporting their saints through donations of shelters, water facilities, and maintenance funds^[15].

In the domain of epigraphy, the transition from Tamil-Brahmi script to Vatteluttu script, which occurred at Alagar Malai, is a significant phase regarding the evolution of Tamil scripts. Through these inscriptions, the historian can trace the developments that occurred over a thousand years in language, style of writing, orthography, and politico-social organization.

Historically speaking, the Alagar Malai inscriptions are important evidence in reconstructing the society of the Sangam era, which reveal information about occupational specialization, clan system (kula), religious toleration, and the relationship between ascetics and lay followers. They also reveal that Jainism had been deeply entrenched in the Tamil region well before the rise of temple institutions^[16].

Conclusion

Alagar Malai is an exemplary instance of the continuity and development that has been witnessed within the religious and cultural history of Tamil Nadu over the ages. Although the current tradition associated with this site is linked with Vaishnavite worship, this hill has preserved an important witness within itself to an earlier Jain monastery through the support of Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, cave-cut architecture, bed inscriptions, and water drains that offer proof of the intimate presence of Jainism within the Madurai region during the Sangam Age.

The Alagar Malai inscriptions offer a treasure trove of information regarding the early Tamil society, especially regarding the mercantile segments and religious endowments. Mentions of “gold merchants,” “wood merchants,” “iron merchants,” and “ornament merchants” emphasize the vibrant economic society that was interlinked with the ascetic centres. The shift from Tamil-Brahmi script to Vatteluttu script also illustrates the developments that occurred over the span of many centuries regarding writing and administrative systems of the Tamil culture.

Turning to the general historical context, the site of Alagar Malai can be understood not only in terms of its sacredness but also for its multifaceted nature as a cultural landscape which marks the presence of religious tolerance, the presence of occupational specialization, or the dynamics of monks, merchants, and the local people. The presence, side by side, of Jain inscription and Vaishnavite architecture bears ample witness to the gradual and inclusive nature of the religious change in the Tamil Nadu of the ancient South Indian context.

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