

Garden Donations under the Gingee Nayak Dynasty: An Epigraphical Study

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Abstract

The gift of temple gardens during the Gingee Nayak era based on epigraphical evidence. The Nayak rulers and their administrators contributed significantly to temple maintenance by donating garden lands, which provided a continuous supply of flowers for daily worship, festivals, and special occasions. These gardens, known as "*Nandavana*," provided flowers for daily worship, festivals, and special events. Such donations ensured a consistent supply of flowers, which were important for temple rituals and ceremonies. Inscriptions show that the gardens were funded by royal family members, local leaders, and even common people, reflecting the strong connection between religion and society during the Nayak period. Some inscriptions also highlight the role of women in these contributions. The article uses historical analysis to understand the religious, social, and economic significance of these gardens during the Gingee Nayak period.

Keywords: Gingee Nayak, temple gardens, epigraphy, religious donations, socio-economic impact.

1. Introduction

The Gingee Nayaks, also known as the Senji Nayaks, emerged as a prominent dynasty in Tamil Nadu following the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire in the late 16th century. After the Battle of Talikota in 1565, the once-mighty Vijayanagara Empire began to crumble, and many regional governors or Nayaks, appointed by the empire to govern various provinces, gradually started asserting their independence.¹ The Gingee Nayaks were one such group, and they played a significant role in shaping the political and cultural landscape of the region. The Gingee Nayaks were primarily of Telugu origin, a characteristic they shared with many Nayak rulers across Tamil Nadu. Initially, they were appointed by the Vijayanagara rulers as governors to oversee and manage key territories. However, with the weakening central authority of Vijayanagara, the Gingee Nayaks slowly became independent rulers. Their capital was the impressive Gingee Fort, a strategically important location that provided military and administrative advantages. Gingee Fort, with its nearly impregnable structure, was their stronghold, safeguarding them from invasions and rivalries.²

Gingee Fort's history itself is a subject of debate, as its exact origins and early development are still topics of scholarly investigation. While the fort is widely believed to have existed even before the

Nayaks took control, it was under the Gingee Nayaks that it gained prominence as a political and military hub. The Nayaks strengthened the fort, making it one of the most formidable fortifications in southern India. As the capital of their kingdom, it served both as a symbol of their authority and a critical defensive structure.³ The Gingee Nayaks controlled a vast region that stretched from the Palar River in the north to the Coleroon River in the south, a significant expanse of land that included key economic and religious centers. Their rule marked a period of relative stability in the region, with the Nayaks promoting agriculture, temple construction, and trade. They played an essential role in maintaining law and order, and their patronage of temples and culture contributed to the rich religious and artistic heritage of Tamil Nadu.⁴ Inscriptions from the Gingee Nayak era reveal that donations of garden lands were common, signifying both the economic and religious importance of such endowments.

2. Methodology

This study employs the historical methodology to examine the practice of *Nandavana* (temple garden) donations during the Gingee Nayak era. The historical method allows for a thorough exploration of primary and secondary sources, including inscriptions, literary texts, and temple records, to construct an accurate understanding of the religious and cultural significance of these gardens. The approach is both analytical and descriptive, aiming to trace the development and importance of *Nandavana* donations through an examination of various historical sources.

3. Objectives

The following objectives guide this study on *Nandavana* donations during the Gingee Nayak era:

- To explore the role of *Nandavana* in temple rituals during the Gingee Nayak era.
- To examine the practice of land donations for temple gardens by royal patrons and the public.
- To analyze the economic and religious significance of *Nandavana* in temple management.

4. Research Gap

Despite the significant role temple gardens (*Nandavana*) played in the religious, cultural, and economic life of South India during the Gingee Nayak era, the practice of gifting land for temple gardens has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies on the Gingee Nayaks have focused on broader aspects of their rule, such as military conquests, fort architecture, and political administration. While there is extensive research on temple patronage, the specific contribution of *Nandavana* donations and their importance in temple rituals and management remains underexplored. Existing historical and epigraphical studies often mention land donations for temples, but they seldom delve into the distinct practice of donating land for gardens, which had both religious and economic implications. The lack of dedicated research on *Nandavana* contributions leaves a gap in understanding the nuanced relationship between temple patronage and floriculture during the Gingee Nayak period. This article aims to fill that gap by providing a detailed analysis of the donation of temple gardens, examining inscriptions, records, and their socio-economic impact. By addressing this overlooked area, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of temple culture and the role of patronage in the Gingee Nayak era.

The Role of Nandavana in Temple Rituals

Temple gardens, known as *Nandavana* in the Tamil tradition, held a special place in the temple complexes of medieval and early modern South India. These gardens were not only vital for their aesthetic appeal but also played a central role in the daily rituals and ceremonies performed in temples.⁵ The flowers grown in these *Nandavanas* were offered to deities, used to decorate idols, and utilized during festivals and special occasions. This ensured a consistent and reliable source of fresh flowers, crucial for the daily upkeep of temple worship practices. The *Nandavana* represented more than a functional garden; it symbolized the bond between the divine and the natural world. The act of donating lands for these temple gardens was seen as an expression of religious devotion, believed to grant the donor significant spiritual merit. Both royal patrons and commoners contributed to the establishment of *Nandavana* as part of their religious duty, underscoring the importance of these gardens in the socio-religious landscape of the time.⁶

Land Donations for Temple Gardens in Srimushnam

Two inscriptions from the Adivaraha Perumal Temple, Srimushnam dated Saka 1505 and Saka 1504, provide important details about the gifts of land for temple gardens by Rayasam Venkatayar, a servant at the door of Kondama Nayaka, the son of Vaiyappa Krishnappa Nayaka. These inscriptions emphasize the role of royal servants and officials in maintaining the temple's religious activities through land donations, which were used to support various temple rituals, including the offering of lamps, sacred baths, and the cultivation of flowers for the deity's worship.

The first inscription, dated Saka 1505, records the gift of two villages Sannanattam and Kilavudaiyanattam located in Alambadiparru, part of the region known as Buwanegaviran Pattinam. These lands were donated for the maintenance of a *Nandavana* or flower garden, which was intended to provide flowers for the daily worship of Adivaraha Perumal, the temple's presiding deity. This inscription sheds light on the extensive nature of land donations during the Gingee Nayak period, with entire villages being dedicated to the religious needs of the temple.⁷

In the second inscription, dated Saka 1504, the village of Pirandurai, situated in Kuricheniparru, is gifted by the same individual, Rayasam Venkatayar. This village was also donated for the sacred bath, offerings, lamps, and flowers needed for the temple's daily activities. The continuity of Rayasam Venkatayar's donations underscores the dedication of royal officials to the temple's upkeep, suggesting that their roles extended beyond mere administrative duties and included active participation in religious patronage.⁸

Official's Contribution to Temple Gardens

Another significant inscription from Gingee Taluk, found on a rock under a tamarind tree at Kannalam, records the actions of Nallapa Nayaka, an agent of Vaiyappa Nayaka. Acting under the orders of Vaiyappa Nayaka, Nallapa Nayaka endowed land as *manya* (tax-free land) for the worship and maintenance of a flower garden dedicated to the deity Miraimindanayinar. This inscription highlights the delegation of royal authority to agents like Nallapa Nayaka, who were responsible for ensuring that religious institutions had the necessary resources to function properly. The donation of *manya* land for a temple garden emphasizes the economic importance of such donations. By providing tax-free land, the

Nayak rulers ensured that temples had a stable source of income to maintain their gardens, which in turn supported the religious and ritual activities central to the temple's role in society.⁹

Garden Donation in Memory of Muddu Krishnappa Nayaka

An inscription from the Netroddharakasvamin Temple in Panaiyavaram, Villupuram records a garden donation made for the merit of Muddu Krishnappa Nayaka. While the details of this inscription are more succinct than those of others, it reveals that donations of gardens were often made in honor or memory of individuals, particularly members of the royal family or their close associates. The act of gifting a garden in someone's name was a way of ensuring that their legacy would be remembered and associated with the temple's religious practices. This practice of commemorating individuals through land donations reflects the deeply personal nature of religious patronage during the Gingee Nayak period. Temples were not only centers of worship but also served as places where the memory and deeds of royal figures and other patrons were preserved through inscriptions and commemorative donations.¹⁰

Temple Garden Donations for Festival Needs

An inscription found at Trivikarama Perumal Temple, Tirukkoyilur dated to Saka 1489, found on the same wall as the previous records, describes a donation made by Timmayyar Annagal, the agent of Surappa Nayaka. This inscription details the gift of certain garden lands for the expenses associated with the Vaigai festival of the god, which likely required an increased supply of flowers for the grand decorations and offerings made during the celebration. The mention of the Vaigai festival in this inscription highlights the heightened demands placed on temple gardens during special religious occasions. Festivals were a major part of temple life, drawing large crowds of worshippers and requiring elaborate floral decorations to honor the deity. Donations of land for flower gardens were therefore critical to ensuring that temples could meet these demands and maintain the sanctity of their rituals.¹¹

Garden Land Donation for Monastery Maintenance

An inscription from Tirukkoyilur Taluk, dated to Saka 1524, was found on a slab set up in a casuarina tope near the iron bridge over the Turinjilar. This inscription records the gift of garden land by Vaiyamman, an individual donor, for the merit of Krishnappa Nayaka. The land was donated for the maintenance of a matham (religious monastery) at Devanur, indicating that donations of garden land were not limited to temples but also extended to other religious institutions, such as monasteries. This inscription illustrates the broader religious network supported by land donations during the Gingee Nayak period. Temples, mathams, and other religious institutions all relied on the generosity of patrons for their upkeep, and the gift of garden land played a vital role in ensuring that these institutions could continue their spiritual and social functions.¹²

Garland Donations by Royal Women for Daily Worship

An inscription found at the Vridhagirisvara Temple in Virudhachalam registers the provision of two garlands every day to Adivaraha Svamin and Ambujavalli Nancharamma by a maid of honor attached to the harem of Kondama Nayani Krishnappa Nayaka. This inscription is particularly noteworthy because it records the gift of garlands rather than land, suggesting that flowers and floral offerings were so integral to temple rituals that even non-landed gifts were considered significant. The mention of a maid of honor

from the royal harem as the donor also sheds light on the involvement of royal women in religious patronage. While much of the recorded patronage during this period comes from male rulers and officials, this inscription indicates that women in royal households were also active in supporting temple worship, particularly through the provision of flowers for daily offerings.¹³

5. Conclusion

The inscriptions from the Gingee Nayak period reveal the deep connection between religion, economy, and politics during this time. Through the donation of land for temple gardens, both royal patrons and private individuals played a critical role in sustaining temple rituals and ensuring the availability of flowers for worship. These gardens, known as *Nandavana*, were essential to the religious life of the temple, providing the flowers needed for daily offerings, festivals, and special occasions. The practice of land donations for temple gardens not only had religious significance but also contributed to the economic sustainability of temples and other religious institutions. The establishment of *Nandavana* was a reflection of the piety of donors, whose contributions were immortalized in inscriptions and whose legacy was tied to the ongoing spiritual life of the temple. By examining these inscriptions, we gain valuable insights into the ways in which religious, economic, and political life intersected during the Gingee Nayak era, with temple gardens serving as a key element in this complex relationship.

Endnotes

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