



## The Society of Nayak Period the Villages, Charities, Endowments, Institutions and Traditions Language on Literature

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The Nayaks had entrusted powers and privileges to courtiers who controlled the different resources of the kingdom both at the centre and at local level. The Nayaks administration was bureaucratic in nature and gave way to a feudal society. But the Nayak Kings from Visvanatha Nayak to Muthu Virappa Nayak I 1609-1623 or upto the rule of Thirumalai Nayak (1623-1659), were feudatories of the Vijayanagar rulers. But they carried out the functions of the state in their capacity as centralised administrators through central ministers and local chieftains who were assigned with territories for their own control. The Nayak Kings allowed their officials to administer the territories with free hands and to pay 1/3 of the total revenue to them, as they were paying tributes to the Vijayanagar rulers. Thus society was not isolated to political developments. But it began to assume a rigid and petrified form and irrational social practices became conspicuous feature of this period. The extreme dependence of people on rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions enabled the priestly class to impose or follow rigid rules and practices, which paved the way for social hierarchy, sectarianism and orthodoxy. The literature of the Nayak age was characterised by the production of exegetical, philosophical, puranic, didactic and minor works. It also witnessed the development of religious literature, concerning Saivism and Vaisnavism and pertaining to the works on Islam, Christian faith and philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Social Stratification, Caste Hierarchy, Madurai in Nayaks Periods, Traditions of the Nayak Age.*



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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the long and chequered history of the society of the Madurai kingdom, there have been

periods of progress, reform, regeneration, decay, dissolution and degeneration. The period of the Nayaks rule had its exemplary society which was

earmarked for stability, prosperity, unity, security and tolerance. Hence the kingdom of the Nayaks was the cradle of Dravidian civilization and their capital Madurai, was the gate way to Dravidian culture, and also their people were Dravidian stock. The majority Hindu population spoke any one of the Dravidian languages like Telugu, Kannerese, Tamil and Malayalam. The Urdu speaking Muslims and European Christians formed the minority in the society. The emigrants, from Vijayanagar Empire to Madurai along with the Nayak rulers, were Telugu speaking people. According to Robert Caldwell, Telugu is a Dravidian language and most of the people in the Tamil country are speaking Telugu language. Even now, people of different castes, such as Brahmins, Chettiyars, Naidus or Nayaks, Rajus, Reddiyars, Kammalars, Chakkiliyars, Ottars, Melakaras etc., are speaking Telugu in Tamil Nadu. The ascendancy of the Nayaks initiated and encouraged the settlement of the Telugus mostly in the Madurai Kingdom

As the advent of Nayak rule gave a boon of religious freedom and these rulers were found to be patrons of Hinduism, the people felt unity, despite regional, linguistic barriers in the society. Though the Nayaks were aliens they became part and parcel of the Tamil society, which passed through numerous changes due to the policies and reforms of the Nayak rulers. Thus society was not isolated to political developments. But it began to assume a rigid and petrified form and irrational social practices became conspicuous feature of this period. The extreme dependence of people on rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions enabled the priestly class to impose or follow rigid rules and practices, which paved the way for social hierarchy, sectarianism and orthodoxy. The Hindus, tolerated all external religions with quiet indifference within themselves, yet they were not interested to accept social equality and unity among them, due to rigidity in caste system and complex. Thus the society was a caste ridden one and the caste system was one of the controversial social institutions. Socially, the caste system, divided the society into watertight compartments but economically, it enabled each caste or the sub-caste, to be allotted with an occupation.

As a consequence, those occupational groups or castes, along with their livelihood,

promoted lot for the preservation of arts, crafts, skill, techniques, besides religion, literature and philosophy. The religious ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices and festivities of the Nayak age, had their echo in their social life. Greater stress was there to external form of religion than inner reality; hence the religious superstitions which were more and numerous began to pervade in all aspects of their social life. The dominance of priestly class became acute. Amidst ignorance and blind belief, the dangerous religious oriented social customs were accepted by all. So child marriage, polygamy, sati, devadasi system, concubinage, slavery, untouchability and seclusion of women were some of the evil customs which prevailed in that society.

## 2. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The society was differentiated on the basis of the occupations and vocational activities of the people. With the support of the Nayaks the old traditional social set up continued without much change. There existed various social units, which had separate identity and distinctions. They were stratified in the social hierarchy as high and low. The high castes at the top level of the social ladder claimed utmost reverence and privileges whereas the members of the lowest groups were unprivileged, secluded or isolated. Among them there existed numerous grades depending on the nature of caste profession. In such a social system, the individual's life and occupation were determined at his birth irrespective of his tastes, talent and inborn qualities that lay behind beneath the caste. While the upper castes expressed caste purity, the practice of untouchability was observed by all in the society.

In the society, there were touchables and untouchables. The concept of human equality, which was upheld by all religions, was valueless in the context of social relations. The untouchables were denied of specific privileges such as prevention from using the common tanks, wells, inns and temples, which are meant for upper caste people. The Nayak rulers recognized the priestly class with special privileges. Religious studies and education were imparted and restricted only to the Brahmins. As a consequence, the status, occupations, duties and privileges of the people of each caste and sub caste, were enforced and

differentiated. Each social unit or caste had its own individualistic status, dignity and role in the society. There existed several social groups called priestly class, martial class, the official class, related to royalty, vocational classes based on occupations such as agriculture, cattle rearing, fishing, hunting, washing, weaving, etc.

There were groups of people engaged in fine arts such as dancing, playing musical instruments, singing, etc. The very same age-old traditional structure of the society prevailed and the Nayak rulers did not disturb them. The rigidity of the caste system was visible from the prevalence of caste supremacy, untouchability, unapproachability and caste hierarchy in the society. The ancestors of the Nayak rulers of Madurai were army captains and noble men, notable for their military services. They lived in pomp and show, observed dignity and decorum, travelled in style and maintained a large harem. They inaugurated the festivals and observed pilgrimages. They were attached to Rajagurus and Purohita. After the death of Thirumalai Nayak, his successor, Muthu Virappa Nayak II, gave the administrative charge of Sivakasi and Tinnevely to Kumara Muthu the younger brother of Thirumalai Nayak. When Chokkanatha Nayak captured Tanjore, he appointed his foster-brother, Alagiri Nayak its Viceroy. When Rani Meenakshi, came to the throne in 1732 A.D, after the death of her husband, her brother Venkata Perumal Nayak, assisted and supported her in the administration.

### 3. THE OFFICIALS AND DIFFERENCES

The Nayak kings were assisted by set of ministers and officials. Dalavay, Pradhani and Rayasam, formed the trio of the king's council. The other chief officials were Kanakkan, the accountant and Sthanapathi, the foreign secretary. Besides them, there were governors for the large provinces, viz., Trichinopoly, Tinnevely and Satyamangalam. (Clement, 1974, p.115) Among these three provincial governors, the governor of Tinnevely enjoyed high status and exercised large powers. Below the governors, there were powerful poligars. Among them the poligars of Manamadurai, Sendamangalam, Maramangalam, Salem and Dharapuram were powerful and the poligar of Kannivadi was considered the chief of the eighteen poligars of Dindigul. The poligars

claimed themselves as sole rulers of the Palayams and it was their primary duty to promote the welfare of their subjects. Each poligar had nominal officers called Pradhan and Sherogars and village councilors or Kavalkars. As such the poligars too were responsible for creating different grades of officials and distinctive sets of people in the society, because it was possible for them as they were only administering their Palayams independently

### 4. THE CASTE HIERARCHY

The Nayaks migrated to Madurai kingdom, during the ascendancy of the rule of Visvanatha Nayak and surpassed the other caste people in efficiency and valour. Though they were permitted to participate in the administration, as chief military commanders and poligars, bulk of their community took to their traditional occupation, viz., the agriculture. They mostly settled at river banks and fertile areas, where black or karisal soil and sheval or red soil lands were available in plenty. (Thurston, 1909) They cultivated the traditional crops, such as paddy, cotton, plaintain and grains like ragi and kambu and cereals like blackgram and bengalgram, in plenty. Even now the Naidus or the Nayakkar caste in the villages, are mainly cultivating these crops. The Nayaks or the Nayakkars or the Naidus have lot of branches of sub-castes but all speak Telugu language. They were Kammavar, Baliza or Vadugar, Vellama, Thottiya, Kambalattar and Valayalkara. The Kammavars, Balizas and Kambalattars topped the list, as poligars, agriculturists and merchants of par excellence. They also served as officials, chiefs and soldiers of the army. The kings of Madurai, their governors and most of the poligars in the Madurai kingdom were supposed to be the ancestors of these castes.

Ramabadra Nayak, the military chief of Visvanatha Nayak was appointed the first poligar of Vadakarai or Periyakulam Palayam. Ramabadra Nayak and his successors hailed from Baliza or Vadugar division of that Telugu Nayakkar caste. Matchi Nayak, the poligar of Vadakarai proved his valour and mastery over archery in front of Thirumalai Nayak. To commemorate his memory, even today the descendents of Matchi Nayak, are celebrating a festival called matchi Nayakkar Vettai or hunting at Periyakulam. There were 26

palayams in the Dindigul Seemai or Nadu and amongst them around four palayams namely Vadakarai, Tevaram, Thottiyankottai, Virupatchi were All the sub castes in the Naidu or Nayakkar caste were mostly Vaishnavaites and were distinguished by their manners, customs, ceremonies, traditions and forms of worship. Sourastras or the pattunulkarans were another prominent caste people in the society who migrated from Vijayanagar and settled at Madurai, Periyakulam, Ramanathapuram and Aruppukottai and its suburbs. As, Thirumalai Nayak, was fond of wearing gorgeous silk clothes of various types, he invited these skillful traditional weavers and provided them with all the facilities for their stay at Madurai.

Even now this caste people are habitated in and around Thirumalai Nayak Palace and Mariamman Teppakulam at Madurai. As this artisan group of weavers were patronised and granted with many privileges, they were determinant in the society. The Nayak kings promoted their weaving industry and provided employment opportunities to them. An inscription of Visvanatha Nayak, dated 1560 A.D, at Anniyur, Madurai, reveals that the Nayak king relaxed the taxes imposed on the weaving looms of the sourastras.<sup>45</sup> Those people were rich and influential in the society. Rani Mangammal restored their social status on par with Brahmins with regard to their ceremony Yajur upakarma. Their women were well versed in fine arts too. They followed the customs and manners of the Brahmins and most of them were Vaishnavaites.

The Prasanna Venkatesa Perumal temple in the South Masi Street was constructed by the Nayak rulers, exclusively for them. Even now the traditional hereditary priest or battar of this temple, belonging to Sourastra community, got the special religious privilege of taking the Sadari of God Kallazhagar, during the Chithirai festival at Madurai. As this festival was organised by king Thirumalai Nayak, perhaps this privilege was granted by him to the Sourastra priest, hence his descendants still enjoy that right. The Sourashtras were under the royal custody and patronage. Though they differed in dialects, traditions and customs, they were orthodox and staunch Hindus and served lot for the promotion of economy and social harmony in the Nayak kingdom. There were

Goundars, Maravars, Kallans, Ambalakarans, Chettiyars, Kammalars, Reddiyars, Kaikolars or weavers, Idaiyans or Konars in the Nayak society. They formed the upper strata in the society and they were neither neglected nor patronized by the royalty but were recognized and their services were utilised for the welfare of the society. Among the palayams, the Kambai palayam was put under the control of a Goundar caste poligar. The Goundars were the Kannarese or Kannada speaking people who migrated from Vijayanagar empire, after the ascendancy of the Nayaks in Madurai. An inscription of Thirumalai Nayak, dated, 1653, refers to a grant of lands to a Goundan of Nallamaram, for his loyalty and hospitality to the king.

The Sethupathis of Ramnad, the petty chieftains and feudatories of the Nayak rulers belonged to Marava caste. The Maravars rendered valuable military services to the Nayak rulers. Kallans or Ambalakarans was another social unit, mostly found in bulk in Nattam, Melur and Sivagangai areas. The Pallimadam inscription of Thirumalai Nayak, dated 1650 A.D., reveals that, he gave a copper plate charter to an Ambalakaran. The caste of Kallar or Ambalakaran is also called Ambalam. Veliyankundram was one of the palayams of the Nayaks and was located K.M away to the North East of Madurai. Thus Kallars rendered valuable military services and police duties and assisted the Nayaks to maintain peace and security. The Reddiyars, who spoke Telugu also migrated from Andra and settled in the suburbs of Madurai, Dindigul, Tirumangalam and Aruppukottai. Many villages in the Madurai kingdom had the name of this caste, where this group of people live in bulk, viz., Reddiyapatty near Sattur, Reddiyarchattiram near Dindigul. The Chettiyars also have Telugu as their mother tongue. The subdivisions among them were Vaishya chettiyars, Vanian chettiyars and Devanga chettiyars. The Yadavas or the Konars were another popular group in the society and they were also called Idayans. Their main occupation was cattle rearing and they originally belonged to Trinel. He also built Ramayana Chavadi where they could perform, sing and enact scenes, connected with God Vishnu in the epics of Ramayana and Mahabaratha. Still that Choultry is under the custody of the Yadava people and the street is



called Ramayana Chavadi street.<sup>80</sup> As the Yadavas or Konars were staunch Vaishnavaites, the Nayak kings constructed the Navaneetha Krishnan temple at North Masi Street in Madurai, and granted lands and a pond at Thiruppalai village, to this temple for its maintenance and for the celebration of the Thirthavari festival or Theppam festival. (Sathyanatha Aiyar, 1991) Even now the deity God Navaneetha Krishnan is taken to the pond at Thiruppalai for this Thirthavari festival.

## 5. THE STREET NAME OF MADURAI IN NAYAKS PERIODS

The names of the streets at Madurai, especially around the Meenakshi temple reveal that there were innumerable sub-castes and the inhabitants had their own specific profession and on the basis of their occupation and castes, they settled in those streets. Some of the names of the streets are given below, which are still in existence:

- Chittrakarrar theru (painter's street) 2.
- Pachcharisikarar theru (raw rice seller's street)
- Pookarrar theru (flower vendor's street)
- Valaiyalkarrar theru (bangle seller's street)
- Chunnambukarrar theru (limestone seller's street)
- Ezhuttanikarrar theru (manuscript writer's street) 7
- Kothan theru (mason's street)
- Mettukammalar theru (artisan's street)
- Vengallakadai theru (bronze vessels seller's street)
- Chinnakadai uppukarar theru (salt vendors street)
- Andharvanam thannirpandal theru (water supplier's street)
- Kollanpattarai theru (goldsmith's street)
- Bhattarmar theru (temple priest's street)
- Vadampokki theru (temple's car rope puller's street)
- Vadakkukavalkuda theru (security or guard's street)
- Kudirailada theru (stable maintainer's street)
- Naickerpudu theru (Nayakar's new street)
- Vaduga Thattara sandhu (Carpenter's street)
- Maravar chavadi Theru (Soldier's street)
- Dalavai theru (Dalavay's street)
- Mahal theru (King's palace street)

- Poonthottam theru (flower garden maintainer's street)
- Yannaikarrar theru (mahout's street)
- Navabatkana theru (musician's street)
- Thannapamudali theru (Thannapamudali street)
- Sembian kinattrru sandhu (brass vessels and idols maker's street)
- Sayakkarrar sandhu (colour-dyer's street)
- Paavukarrar sandhu (weaver's street)
- Othuvar sandhu (temple musician's street)
- Vanniyan Kinattrru sandhu (oil crusher's and seller's street)
- Vettrilai kadai sandhu (beetal leaves seller's street)
- Adimulam pillai agraharam (Adimulam pillai's street)
- Sourastras sandhu (Sourastra's street)
- Parpanar kinarru sandhu (Brahmin's street)
- Ramayana chaavadi konnar sandhu (konnar street)

The Nayaks of Madurai were not the descendants of Tamil origin. But they were capable of retaining the traditions of the natives and maintaining the glory of the Tamilnadu. Without meddling with the existing traditions, the Nayaks introduced modifications, in aspects such as villages, charities, endowments, institutions and traditions. As such, it becomes a must to have an analysis of such facts. They maintained the native political tradition of considering the village as the primary, fundamental and basic unit of the administrative hierarchy and as a prime structure for social activities and economic developments. In order to promote the growth of villages, they pursued a benevolent policy and encouraged emigration from Andradesa to Tamil country and donated lands and settlements to them. They also appointed them artisans, priests, royal officials and thereby provided them with profession or occupation.

## 6. THE INSTITUTIONS AND THE TRADITIONS OF THE NAYAK AGE

The greatness of the Nayak rulers is exhibited by their traditions and institutions. No sovereign of Madura lineage, except Visvanatha Nayak and Thirumalai Nayak gained such a lasting remembrance in the memory of mankind as Mangammal". (Thurston, 1909) Thus the Nayak rulers left a strong impression in the minds of the

people and their contemporaries, through their dedication, benefaction and contribution, through their institutions and traditions in their kingdom. The Nayak lineage of kings introduced poligar system and replaced the ancient land organisation. A new social group of aristocrat emerged in the society, as poligars, who were mostly emigrants, had Telugu and Kannada as their lingua-franca. They cleared the jungles, encouraged emigrants, constructed forts, palaces and temples and introduced several welfare measures to promote the economy.

The statues of the deities in the celestial wedding form, carved on pillars of the mandapams of the Nayaks, reveal the marriage function and the ceremonies. The Chithirai festival functions which were started by Thirumalai Nayak, indicated about the marriage ceremonies, customs and traditions of the Nayak age. It was during the reign of King Thirumalai Nayak, the lover of art and architecture this Devadasi system, was accepted by all as a social tradition. The dancing women, in the festivals and ceremonies of the temples, were called Devadasis. The palaces and the temples, almost all, had flower gardens or Nanthavanam. Thirumalai Nayak made Madura as the festival city. Every month there were festivals, relating to Hindu Puranas like Chithirai festival, Puttu Thiruvila and festivals related to Thiruvilaiyadal Puranam, besides usual festivals on the full moon and new moon days of a month, in the Meenakshi Temple.

At that juncture the performances of the dancing girls were encouraged. Dance and music performances were carried by the Devadasis in the temple. Folk arts like Kummi, Kollattam or Pasavanna were executed. Even now such dances are common not only in Madurai temple festival but also in Tirupati temple Brahmorchava festival. These dances were executed by Devadasis, but now they are carried out by devotees. This theatre or dance hall was used by King and his queens, guests and chieftains to witness dances in the evenings, performed by dancing girls, well versed in those arts. Still this hall with its original architectural beauty, renders feast to vision and brain of the tourists who visit the palace.

## 7. TRADITIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

Traditions are the self expressions and experiences of the community which make the society to be self-conscious, united and be aware

of the past culture. Traditions are the jewel caskets of humanity. The cultural activities of the Nayaks still exist and impress the people and it is noted for its synthetic tendency and steadfastness. The continuity of the traditions of the Nayak age, recollect and cherish the memory of the Nayak age. The benevolent and tolerant policies of the Nayak rulers, enabled the people of different regions, races, linguistics, religion and habits to be blended together as the people of the Hindu kingdom. The Nayak rulers gave a strong stimulus to habitation by encouraging agriculture, exploring cultivable lands from the denudation of forests, granting lands for hamlets and by providing all facilities such as digging reservoirs called ponds or kulams, constructing roads, temples and agraharas, their kingdom was reclaimed to civilized ways.

He was the forerunner of prose writing in Tamil literature. His works, were Unmai Vilakkam, Thirukkavalur Kalambagam, Adaikalanayaki Venkalippa, Keitheriammal Ammanai and Tamil Cheiyul Togai. In the History of Tamil literary writing, he introduced two styles, one was in writing a satire and another was in writing stories in prose, which had a lasting effect on Tamil literary writing. He wrote a dictionary called the Saturakarati which was the first of its kind. Along with Christians, the Muslim scholars too contributed to the growth of language and literature. As the Nayak period was known for religious freedom and toleration, even without the adequate royal patronage, scholars and literary men of different religion, wrote poems, prose, grammar and dramas in Tamil language mostly, but rarely in Telugu and English. The literature of the Nayak age was characterised by the production of exegetical, philosophical, puranic, didactic and minor works. It also witnessed the development of religious Christian faith and philosophy. The increased temple building and religious activities of the Nayaks, the migration of Telugus, Sourastras and Kannarese to Madurai and the advent of Christian missionaries and European traders to the Tamil country, entertained the growth of many languages such as Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil and English. A new style of Tamil literature called Prabandham emerged popularly in that era. Many writers reproduced the religious texts of the past in their languages.

Poets and scholars did not illuminate the Nayak court mostly. But few of them adorned it

with royal patronage. Some of the Nayak kings were patrons of learning and men of letters. The letter of Jaques de Coutre, a Christian priest who visited the Nayak court in 1610 A.D., informs that the Nayak kings concentrated on educational development and their capital, Madura, was the centre of learning and education. Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil languages and literature flourished during that period. It is revealed by a foreign account that near about fifty four poets and men of letters lived in the Nayak court in the 16th Century.

## 8. CONCLUSION

By the critical and interpretative analysis of the various facts pertaining to the culture of the Tamils under the Nayaks of Madurai, the following conclusion is arrived and it form the portrayal of the cultural history of the Nayaks. The Nayaks, who came to Madurai as Viceroys, gradually became independent rulers. As they were well trained in the art of administration under the Vijayanagar rulers, who were known for their administrative ability, intellectual calibre, social cohesion and religious achievements, the Madurai Nayaks too maintained such aspects. By introducing the poligar system, they were able to offer a well knitted administration to their subjects. With the extraneous forces from Vijayanagar, notable officials such as Dalavay and Pradhani and poligars were appointed by them. The strong monarchy with decentralised form of government and the poligar system offered them solid grounds for political stability. This political system enabled them to concentrate more on other activities such as economic upliftment, cultural pursuits and religious services. They also named the streets based on the activities. For instance, Thirumalai Royar Padithurai Veedhi, Thamukkam Salai, Pattu thun sandhu and so on. will attest to that. The analysis of the villages, charities, endowments, institutions and traditions of the Nayaks too assists one in framing opinion about the culture of the Tamils of the contemporary period.

In the history of Madurai one could see the reign of female rulers only in the Nayak period alone and it is easy to infer their superior position. There are references about the existence of the custom of Sati and system of Devadasis. Such facts reveal that the position of women was not at all deplorable. that the Nayaks are beyond

comparison when compared with others in the cultural history of the Tamils. They have imprinted an indelible impression in the history of the social, cultural, and artistic features of the already glorious and renowned Tamil country during various periods. The uniform devotion of the Nayak rulers towards the people and state enabled them to achieve success in enhancing the cultural phase of the Tamils.

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