

Research Paper

POLITICAL HISTORY OF SRIRANGAM – A CHRONOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Srirangam is one of the holiest of Vaishnava temples in South India. Srirangam also known as Thiruvarangam (Tiruchirappalli North) is a small island town adjoining Tiruchirappalli in South India. Srirangam is encircled by the Kaveri river on one side, and the Kaveri tributary Kollidam (coleron) on the other. Since the proposed study is a micro-level one, it is confined only to Srirangam town. Srirangam has been the capital of many empires.

There are a large number of inscriptions in the Srirangam temple which date from the 9th Century to 16th century. Those inscriptions belong to the periods of Chola, Pandya, Hoysala, Vijayanagar and Nayak Dynasties. But the study on the political and religious history of ancient and medieval times has been attempted by a number of scholars; and so have I confined my study to the modern times. Srirangam is a home to a significant population of Vaishnavites. Hence, through this paper, it is well discerned that Srirangam emerged as a historically significant place.

ORIGIN OF SRIRANGAM:

The term 'Srirangam' is composed of two words 'Sri' and 'Arangam'. 'Sri' means beautiful. The land, lying between two rivers, is in the form of an island and hence it is called “Arangam”. This religious centre (Kshetram) lies between the rivers Couvery and Coleron. The traditional account of how the temple at Srirangam came to be established is interesting. Sri Rama, the King of Ayodhya, gave permission to Vibhishana to remove Sri Ranga vimana with Sri Ranganatha and take it to Sri Lanka with an express condition that it should not be placed anywhere on the way. But when Vibhishana reached the island of Srirangam, he was forced by circumstances not to move further. Thus, Sri Ranga vimana remained in Srirangam for good. Srirangam can be reached from Tiruchirappalli through Mambazha salai and Tiruvanaikka crossing a distance of four miles. The environs of the road to Srirangam has a lot of greenery on either side, an abundance of coconut, mango and jack fruit trees around. The picturesque island of Srirangam, the sacred place of annual Ekadasi pilgrimage, is situated 3 miles on the north of Tiruchirappalli.

SRIRANGAM IN THE EARLY TIMES:

The history of Srirangam town dates back to the ancient times. Srirangam is a very ancient place. According to the available literary evidences, the

nucleus of Srirangam seems to have been in existence in the period of the Tamil Sangam roughly in A.D. The capital of the early Chola kingdom was Uraiur, a suburb of the Tiruchirappalli town, which is identified with “Oppoopo” mentioned by the Greek geographer Ptolemy (about 130 A.D.).² In the early centuries, the Cholas built their capital at Uraiur and laid out streets.³ The author of Periplus of the Erythrean sea refers to Uraiur as a trading centre.⁴ The greatest among the ancient Cholas, Karikala chola (50 A.D. – 95 A.D) vanquished the Cheras and Pandyas; and extended his kingdom and shifted the capital from Uraiur to Kaveripoompattinam.⁵

Later on, the Pandyas became the overlords of Tiruchirappalli region including Srirangam. The rise of the Pallavas under Simhavishnu (595 A.D – 600 A.D), and the expansion of their territory towards the south resulted in the confrontation between the two powers.⁶ On account of the imperial power of the Pandyas, the Pallavas could not extend their power over Tiruchirappalli.⁷

The cave temples were constructed under the patronage of the Pallava Mahendravarman I, in the seventh century in Tamil Nadu. Mahendravarman is the earliest known patron of stone temple in Tamil Nadu, and at this site he left a record of his benefaction in the inscriptions around the shrine of Shiva. The themes of gods, kings, and their patronage recur through out the later history of Tiruchirappalli and the nearby sacred island of Srirangam.⁸

THE CHOLAS:

The Chola ruler Vijayalaya revived the Chola power and Tiruchirappalli district (Srirangam town) became the part of the Chola empire.⁹ Later his son Aditya I took the opportunity of the Pallava - Pandya conflict at Sripurambiyam, defeated the Pallava king Aprajita and consolidated his territories.¹⁰ The Chola rulers from Vijayalaya to Rajaraja – I can be regarded as the builders of this great empire. As a very important

city within their empire, Srirangam received its due share to temple building and renovation activities.
CHOLA – PANDYA CONFLICT:

Hoysala intervention: During the period of the Chola – Pandya Conflict, the Hoysalas found an opportunity to interfere. So Mesvara and Ramanatha made Kannanur, 5 miles north of Srirangam, their alternative capital, and called it Vikramapura. Numerous inscriptions are found in the Srirangam temple. According to the Koil Olugu many important structures, shrines and mantapas in the 3rd and 4th enclosures like the 1000 pillared mantapa, the shrines of Paravasudeva. Sudarsana perumal and Lakshminayana perumal, the mantapa of the Nacciyar shrine, etc., were built by the two brother's Kampaya Dandanayakka and Kariyamanikka Dandanayakka, who were the generals in the Hoysala army. From the inscriptions, it is known that the former was a Pradhani of Ramanatha (1263-1295). The Venugopala Shrine, in the fourth Prakara, which is the most ornate shrine in the temple, is attributed by some to the Hoysalas.

THE PANDYAS:

In spite of the help rendered by the Hoysalas, the Cholas lost their empire to the Pandays. Another power which interfered and tried to fish in the troubled waters of the Tamil country during the period Ananga – Bhima 111, sent an army to the South. The Oddas, the men from Orissa, occupied the Srirangam temple for two years (1223 – 25 A.D.) and seriously interfered with its administration. The temple was freed in the later years and the Orissans were forced to retreat by Maravarman Sundara Pandya I (1216-38 A.D.). Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I (1257 – 71 A.D) was a great benefactor of the Srirangam.¹¹ The empire attained its zenith during the time of Maravarman Kulasekhara I (1268 – 1318 A.D). After the death of Maravarman Kulasakhara I, the empire began to decline gradually due to the civil wars waged by the Muslim invaders in Srirangam region.

MUSLIM INVASIONS:

During the years of the decline of the Pandya power occurred the Muslim invasions of Ma'bar i.e. in 1311 and 1323. The Srirangam temple suffered in both the invasions. The Muslims under Malik Kafur invaded the Srirangam region in April 1311 A.D.¹² Malik Kafur's expedition in 1311 A.D. was rather a raid.

The temple was sacked and the gold and the treasure were plundered. But once he returned to Delhi with the booty, a fresh procession image was cast and installed and the worship was restored. But are long came the second invasion. The aim of Ulugh Khan's expedition (1323 A.D.) was the extension of the Tughikh empire southward. The Pandya's lost their region in 1328 A.D. Along with other places in the South, Srirangam became the province of Mabar meaning in Arabic 'passage' or 'ferry' under the Governor of Mabar declared himself independent in 1335 A.D., and became the founder of the Madurai Sultanate.¹⁴

THE VIJAYANAGAR AND NAYAKS:

. With the establishment of the Vijayanagar empire, Srirangam became a part of that empire. Srirangam was under the tutelage of the Vijayanagar empire from 1374 A.D. to 1529 A.D., when Srirangam came under the rule of the Nayaks of Madurai. The importance of Sriramgam for strategic reasons was realized by Viswanath Nayak, the first ruler of the Nayak dynasty of Madurai. He acquired Tiruchirappalli by giving Vallam to the Nayaks of Thanjavur.¹⁵ Viswanatha Nayak renovated the old fort of Tiruchirappalli and constructed a city by clearing the jungle. Srirangam continued to be a place of strategic importance for nearly a century. Muthuveerappa Nayak moved his capital to Tiruchirappalli in 1616 A.D. with an aim to wage war against the ruler of Thanjavur.¹⁶ His younger brother Thrimala Nayak shifted his capital from Srirangam to Madurai in 1640 A.D.

However, Chokkanatha Nayak shifted the capital back to Srirangam in 1665. Thence forth Tiruchirappalli remained as the capital of the Nayaks of Madurai, whose rule continued till 1736 A.D. with various vicissitudes.

Chanda Sahib the Nawab of Arcot seized the fort of Tiruchirappalli in 1736 A.D. In the month of May 1740, the Marathas under Murari Rao invaded the territory of Carnatic. After a three siege Chanda Sahib surrendered on 26th March 1741 and Murai Rao became the Maratha Governor of Srirangam.

CONCLUSION

India can boast of quite a few ancient cities which are noted for either religious and political importance. But there is only one town in the whole of the peninsular India that can really claim all the aspects cited above. The growth and development of various religions such as Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism helped the town carve a covetable niche in the annals of South Indian History. The archaeological excavations in the Srirangam region proclaim to the world the antiquity and diversity of its culture pertaining to the remotest past as well to the pre-historical period. The period relates to that of the early Cholas. The sources are from Tamil literatures. After the decline of the Cholas, the Pandyas and Nayaks made a bid to attain supremacy over the region, but it finally came under the rule of Vijayanagar empire. The total background of Srirangam has been considerably brought out in this study with the available limited resources. Srirangam actually had attained importance mainly owing to its political background. In this way the present study adds a fairly good amount of additional information to the already established political conditions of the Srirangam town.

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