

Institutional Structures And Agrarian Relations In The Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple Inscriptions.

Mr. G. Pradeep ¹, Dr. V. Raju ²

¹PhD. Research Scholar (Full-Time) Department of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar – 608 002.

Email ID : pradeepumathig23@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of History, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli – 602 024

Email ID : amutharaju100@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions as a source for understanding institutional structures and agrarian relations in the Chola–Pandya period. The epigraphs record land grants, tax remissions, irrigation endowments, and ritual obligations, revealing the temple's position as an economic and administrative centre within the rural order. Attention is given to the roles of brahmadeya assemblies, ur and sabha institutions, and temple functionaries in regulating cultivation, managing surplus, and redistributing resources through religious endowments. The inscriptions indicate a close linkage between political authority and sacred institutions, in which royal titles, donor identities, and revenue assignments were integrated into a structured agrarian framework. Patterns of land classification, labour obligations, and produce allocation demonstrate the presence of negotiated relationships between cultivators, local bodies, and temple management. By situating these records within the wider South Indian epigraphic tradition, the study highlights the temple not merely as a religious space but as a node of institutional governance and agrarian control. The findings contribute to the historical understanding of rural organisation, fiscal practices, and social hierarchy in medieval Tamil Nadu through inscriptional evidence...

Keywords: *Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple, Temple Inscriptions, Institutional Structures, Agrarian Relations, Land Grants, Local Assemblies, Medieval Tamil Nadu..*

INTRODUCTION

Temple inscriptions of South India constitute a primary body of evidence for reconstructing the institutional and agrarian organisation of the medieval countryside. The Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple, located in a long-settled agrarian zone, preserves a corpus of inscriptions that document land transactions, fiscal arrangements, and the functioning of local assemblies. These records were first systematically noticed in the Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy (ARE) through field surveys and estampages and were later edited and published in the South Indian Inscriptions (SII) volumes. The Vazhuvur inscriptions, assignable mainly to the Chola and Chola–Pandya phases, reflect an advanced administrative order in which temples served as centres of landholding, revenue assignment, and social regulation.

The ARE notices provide the initial historical stratification of these records by identifying regnal years, dynastic titles, and donor profiles, thereby situating the inscriptions within broader political chronology. The SII volumes further refine this material through palaeographic analysis, standardised transliteration, and interpretative summaries, enabling comparative study with inscriptions from neighbouring regions of the Kaveri delta and its hinterland. Together, ARE and SII establish Vazhuvur as part of a wider inscriptional network that articulated uniform legal and fiscal idioms while accommodating local agrarian conditions. These sources also preserve quantitative references to land measures, tax shares, and produce allocations, offering limited but valuable statistical indicators of agrarian organisation. From a historical statistical perspective, the inscriptions record recurring categories of land such as nanjai (wet land) and punjai (dry land), along with specified extents measured in traditional units like veli and ma. They also enumerate revenue components including irai, kadamai, and kudivari, and occasionally specify proportions of paddy or cash assigned to temple rituals and maintenance. Such figures, though fragmentary, permit an assessment of the scale of temple endowments and the structured nature of surplus extraction

The repetition of similar numerical formulae across different inscriptions suggests a standardised fiscal logic embedded within institutional practice. In terms of historical notions, the Vazhuvur inscriptions reflect a conception of the temple as both sacred and administrative space. Political authority was expressed through royal epithets and regnal dating, while local legitimacy was conveyed through the participation of *ur* and *sabha* assemblies in authorising grants. Agrarian relations were framed not simply as economic exchanges but as ritualised obligations linking cultivators, service groups, and deities. Concepts such as *devadana* land, perpetual lamps (*nanda vilakku*), and endowed irrigation works demonstrate an ideological fusion of piety and production.ⁱ The inscriptions thus articulate a worldview in which agrarian surplus was morally anchored in religious merit and institutionally channelled through established corporate bodies. By integrating the descriptive frameworks of ARE and the edited corpora of SII with an analysis of historical statistics and notions embedded in the texts, this study approaches the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions as structured evidence of institutional order and agrarian relations. They reveal not only the mechanisms of land control and revenue management but also the intellectual and social assumptions that sustained temple-centred governance in medieval Tamil Nadu.ⁱⁱ

Royal Authority and Political Order

The Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions, documented in the *Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy* (ARE) and published in the *South Indian Inscriptions* (SII) volumes, establish a clear association between kingship and institutional patronage. Regnal years and royal epithets situate these records within the Chola and Chola–Pandya administrative horizon. The repeated confirmation means that political authority was exercised through legally sanctioned land grants and fiscal privileges to the temple. This conveys a historical message that sovereignty was expressed not merely through warfare or proclamations but through regulated control over agrarian resources and their ritual redistribution.ⁱⁱⁱ A defining feature of the inscriptions is the prominence of corporate bodies such as the *ur* and *sabha*. These assemblies appear as authorising agencies in land transactions, tax remissions, and irrigation endowments. Witness lists and official designations point to a stable institutional hierarchy consisting of accountants, supervisors, and temple functionaries. Statistically, the recurrence of these bodies across multiple records indicates continuity in village governance.^{iv} The historical message embedded here is that rural society functioned through collective authority rather than individual discretion, with temples serving as legally recognised centres of administration.

Agrarian Economy and Land Classification

The inscriptions preserve quantitative data on land categories and extents measured in units such as *veli* and *ma*. Repeated references to *nanjai* (wet land) and *punjai* (dry land) demonstrate a structured agrarian taxonomy. Revenue terms such as *irai* and *kadamai* are accompanied by specified allocations of produce or exemptions from tax. These numerical expressions provide partial statistical insight into the scale of cultivation and the proportion of surplus redirected to temple maintenance and ritual services. The historical message conveyed is that agriculture operated within an institutional framework governed by rules of measurement, classification, and obligation. The repetition of similar fiscal formulae across different inscriptions suggests a standardised revenue logic. These data show that temples functioned as repositories and managers of agrarian surplus. The historical importance of this evidence shows that taxation and redistribution were embedded in religious institutions, creating a durable system of economic regulation at the village level. Beyond ritual activity, the inscriptions portray the temple as a corporate economic body. Land grants were converted into perpetual services such as *nanda vilakku* (permanent lamps) and daily offerings. This implies long-term planning and accountability. Statistically, the accumulation of multiple endowments over successive reigns indicates an expanding economic base for the temple.^v The historical message is that the temple was entrusted with safeguarding resources and ensuring their productive use, thereby stabilising the agrarian economy.

Agrarian Order and Labour Obligations

The inscriptions articulate defined relationships between cultivators, service groups, and temple authorities. References to irrigation works and maintenance responsibilities indicate that labour was institutionally organised. Cultivation was not treated as a private enterprise alone but as a collective obligation sustained through assemblies and temple management. The historical message here is one of regulated agrarian order in which production, labour, and surplus were coordinated through institutional norms.^{vi} Donors are recorded with names, lineage, and purpose of gift, transforming material endowments into acts of religious merit (*punya*). Quantified gifts—measured land or fixed produce shares—were preserved on stone to ensure permanence. This establishes inscriptions as instruments of social memory. The historical message is that economic actions were morally framed and publicly commemorated, reinforcing social hierarchy and prestige through association with the temple.^{vii}

Ideological Integration of Sacred and Secular

The Vazhuvur inscriptions consistently merge fiscal language with devotional intent. Legal authorisation appears alongside invocations to the deity, and land grants are linked to ritual continuity. This fusion demonstrates that governance, economy, and belief formed a unified institutional order. The historical message conveyed is that agrarian relations were legitimised through religious ideology, making the temple a bridge between sacred authority and secular administration. Across the

corpus, similar formulae, offices, and measurements recur. This repetition suggests long-term stability in institutional practices. Statistically, the clustering of inscriptions within successive regnal periods reflects sustained engagement between rulers, assemblies, and the temple. The historical importance of this continuity lies in its demonstration of durable systems of rural governance and agrarian management in medieval Tamil Nadu. Placed within the wider epigraphic tradition of the Kaveri delta and its hinterland, the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions conform to patterns recorded in other SII sites while preserving local specificities. Their numerical data on land, revenue, and obligations allow comparative study with neighbouring villages. Taken together, these inscriptions represent structured evidence for understanding institutional order, agrarian relations, and the social logic of medieval South Indian society.^{viii}

Royal Authority Expressed through Inscriptions

Chola-period inscriptions from the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple communicate the message that kingship was exercised through legally recorded acts of donation and regulation. Regnal years and royal titles carved on stone assert the continuity of political authority and its recognition by local institutions.^{ix} These records show that royal power was not abstract but materialised in the form of land grants, tax remissions, and ritual endowments made to temples. The inscriptional language conveys that sovereignty was sustained through institutional documentation and public visibility. The Chola inscriptions repeatedly project the temple as an administrative nucleus. Records of *devadana* lands, irrigation endowments, and perpetual services such as *nanda vilakku* (permanent lamps) indicate that the temple functioned as a regulated corporate body. The message conveyed is that religious institutions were entrusted with managing agrarian resources and ensuring their productive and ritual use over generations.

Authority of Local Assemblies (*Ur* and *Sabha*)

Inscriptional references to *ur* and *sabha* assemblies demonstrate that village communities held collective authority in approving and executing transactions. These bodies appear as witnesses and guarantors of land grants and fiscal decisions. The historical message embedded in these records is that Chola administration relied on institutional participation rather than unilateral royal command. Governance was mediated through village assemblies that linked cultivators, temples, and the state. Chola inscriptions consistently record categories such as *nanjai* (wet land) and *punjai* (dry land), measured in units like *veli* and *ma*. They also specify revenue shares and exemptions. These details convey the message that agriculture was organised through a formal system of classification and measurement. Cultivation was integrated into a structured fiscal framework supervised by temple and assembly authorities.^x

Fiscal Discipline and Revenue Allocation

Inscriptions enumerate dues such as *irai*, *kadamai*, and produce shares assigned for lamps, festivals, and temple maintenance. The repetition of similar fiscal terminology across records indicates a standardised revenue system. The message here is that surplus was carefully regulated and redistributed through institutional channels rather than through arbitrary extraction. Several records refer to irrigation maintenance, cultivation duties, and ritual services. These references imply that labour was socially organised and attached to land and institutions. The inscriptions communicate that agrarian production depended on defined responsibilities shared by cultivators and service groups under temple supervision.^{xi}

Merit (*Punya*) and Legitimation of Wealth

Chola inscriptions frame land grants and endowments as acts of religious merit. Donors are named with their lineage and purpose of donation. This conveys the message that wealth acquired through agrarian surplus gained moral legitimacy when transferred to the deity and the temple. Economic power was thus transformed into social prestige and sacred memory. By engraving transactions on stone, the Chola state and local assemblies ensured durability and public recognition. The inscriptions themselves serve as archives of rights, duties, and benefaction. The message conveyed is one of permanence and order: social and economic arrangements were meant to endure beyond individual lifetimes.^{xii}

Integration of Sacred and Secular Authority

Chola inscriptional records consistently blend legal language with devotional expressions. Fiscal regulations appear alongside invocations to the deity. This reveals a worldview in which political authority, agrarian management, and religious belief formed a single institutional structure. The message communicated is that governance and belief were mutually reinforcing dimensions of social order. The recurrence of similar formulae, offices, and measurements across multiple Chola inscriptions from Vazhuvur and neighbouring regions demonstrates institutional stability. These records collectively convey that the Chola age was characterised by a sustained system of rural administration grounded in temples, assemblies, and agrarian regulation, preserved through inscriptional practice.

Land and Cultivation Patterns

The Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions of the Chola age present agriculture as the central basis of village life. Repeated references to *nanjai* (wet land) and *punjai* (dry land) indicate a well-defined classification of cultivable fields. Land was measured in standard units such as *veli* and *ma*, reflecting an organised system of survey and assessment. These records suggest that cultivation was not random or informal but regulated through institutional procedures involving temples and

local assemblies.^{xiii} Several inscriptions refer to tanks, channels, and water rights associated with endowed lands. Maintenance of irrigation works appears as a collective responsibility linked to temple endowments. This indicates that agrarian life depended heavily on managed water resources and that irrigation was supervised through institutional authority. The temple emerged as a focal point for coordinating water distribution and ensuring continuity of cultivation.^{xiv}

Revenue and Produce Obligations

Agrarian life was closely tied to fiscal duties. The inscriptions record taxes such as *irai* and *kadamai* and specify shares of paddy or other produce assigned to the temple for lamps, offerings, and festivals. These details show that cultivators were integrated into a structured system of surplus transfer. Production was therefore inseparable from obligations to religious and administrative institutions. The records imply the participation of different social groups in cultivation and service. References to maintenance duties, ritual services, and agricultural tasks suggest that labour was institutionally organised. Cultivators, artisans, and temple servants formed a network of interdependent roles. Agrarian life thus operated within a framework of defined responsibilities rather than purely household-based farming.

Temple-Centred Rural Economy

The inscriptions reveal that the temple functioned as the economic centre of the village. Land grants were converted into perpetual services such as *nanda vilakku* (permanent lamps) and daily offerings. This demonstrates that agricultural produce sustained ritual life and that ritual institutions, in turn, regulated agrarian resources. The temple acted as a storehouse of surplus and a coordinator of its redistribution. By recording land transactions on stone with witnesses and assembly approval, the inscriptions ensured legal security for cultivators and donors. Agrarian life was embedded in a system of rights and obligations protected by public documentation. This reflects a stable rural order in which landholding and cultivation were governed by institutional norms.^{xv}

Ideological Meaning of Agriculture

Agriculture in the inscriptions is framed not only as economic activity but also as a moral and religious duty. Donations of land and produce are described as acts of merit (*punya*). Cultivation was therefore linked to spiritual value, and agrarian surplus was legitimised through its dedication to the deity. The repetition of similar land categories, taxes, and obligations across multiple inscriptions indicates continuity in agrarian practices over successive Chola reigns. This suggests that rural life was characterised by stable patterns of cultivation, irrigation, and surplus management supported by temples and village assemblies. Taken together, the inscriptions present agrarian life in the Chola age as institutionally organised, temple-centred, and ideologically grounded. Cultivation, irrigation, labour, and revenue were coordinated through local assemblies and temple authorities, creating a structured rural economy in which agriculture sustained both social order and religious practice.^{xvi}

Chronological Range of the Inscriptions

The Vazhuvur Veerateswarar Temple inscriptions belong mainly to the mature and later phases of Chola rule, extending from the late tenth century CE to the early twelfth century CE. The regnal formulae preserved in these records situate the temple within a continuous political sequence that reflects long-term royal supervision of agrarian and institutional arrangements. The chronological span demonstrates sustained engagement of successive rulers with the temple as an administrative and economic centre.

Rajaraja Chola I (c. 985–1014 CE)

The earliest phase of the Vazhuvur inscriptional corpus corresponds to the reign of Rajaraja Chola I. Records dated in his regnal years refer to land grants and ritual endowments made for temple services. These inscriptions establish the initial integration of the temple into the Chola administrative system and reflect the expansion of temple-controlled agrarian resources during his reign.^{xvii}

Rajendra Chola I (c. 1012–1044 CE)

Inscriptions belonging to the reign of Rajendra Chola I continue the pattern of royal patronage and institutional regulation. Regnal references from this period are associated with irrigation maintenance, revenue assignments, and confirmation of earlier grants. This phase indicates consolidation of agrarian management and reinforcement of temple authority within village administration.^{xviii}

Rajadhiraja Chola I (c. 1044–1054 CE) and Rajendra Chola II (c. 1054–1063 CE)

The middle eleventh century inscriptions correspond to the reigns of Rajadhiraja Chola I and Rajendra Chola II. These records demonstrate continuity of institutional practices despite dynastic succession. Land transactions and fiscal provisions recorded during this phase reveal stable mechanisms of governance and uninterrupted temple functioning.

Kulottunga Chola I (c. 1070–1120 CE)

Later inscriptions from Vazhuvur are attributable to the reign of Kulottunga Chola I. These records are significant for

reflecting fiscal reorganisation and confirmation of earlier endowments. Regnal dating under Kulottunga Chola I shows the persistence of temple-centred agrarian administration under changing political conditions.

Chola-Pandya Phase (12th century CE)

Some inscriptions bear titles such as *Chola Pandya Devar*, indicating a phase of Pandya authority operating under Chola political influence. These records, dated to the twelfth century CE, demonstrate the adaptation of Chola institutional structures within a modified political framework.^{xix} The continuation of land grants and temple endowments under Chola-Pandya rulers reflects institutional resilience beyond the height of imperial Chola power. The appearance of successive rulers—Rajaraja Chola I, Rajendra Chola I, Rajadhiraja Chola I, Rajendra Chola II, Kulottunga Chola I, and Chola-Pandya kings—establishes a clear political chronology for the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions. This sequence confirms that the temple remained a recognised centre of administration and agrarian management for more than a century. Through regnal dating, the inscriptions link local agrarian life to imperial authority and preserve a continuous historical record of governance, land control, and institutional order in the Chola age.

CONCLUSION

The Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions constitute a significant corpus of epigraphic evidence for understanding institutional structures and agrarian relations in the Chola and Chola-Pandya periods. Recorded in the *Annual Reports on Indian Epigraphy* and published in the *South Indian Inscriptions* volumes, these records illuminate the interaction between royal authority, local assemblies, and temple administration within a structured rural order. Through regnal dating and formal legal language, the inscriptions anchor agrarian transactions within a recognised political framework and demonstrate continuity of governance across successive reigns.

The inscriptions reveal that agriculture was organised through clearly defined categories of land, standardised measures, and regulated fiscal obligations. Land grants, tax remissions, and produce allocations show that agrarian surplus was systematically channelled towards temple maintenance and ritual services. This underscores the temple's role as an economic institution that coordinated cultivation, irrigation, and redistribution. The participation of *ur* and *sabha* assemblies further indicates that village society operated through collective authority and institutional accountability. Beyond their economic content, the inscriptions convey ideological and social meanings. Donations of land and produce were framed as acts of religious merit, transforming material resources into instruments of moral legitimacy and social memory. The fusion of fiscal regulation with devotional expression demonstrates that sacred and secular domains were not separate but mutually reinforcing. Through the public recording of rights and obligations, the inscriptions ensured permanence and stability in agrarian relations and institutional practices. Taken together, the Vazhuvur Veeratteswarar Temple inscriptions present a coherent picture of a temple-centred rural system sustained by political power, collective institutions, and agrarian production. They stand as enduring historical sources for reconstructing patterns of land control, revenue management, and social organisation in medieval Tamil Nadu.

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