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SECULARISM IN THE LAND OF SETHU NADU OF SETHUPATHIS OF RAMANAD

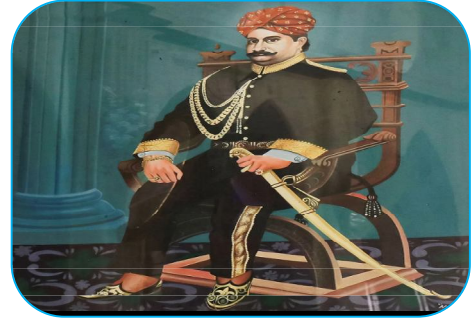
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ABSTRACT:

No one can have an alternative opinion on the fact that the native Tamils reached the peak of cultural development many centuries ago. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the donations made by the Sethupathis of Ramnad for the maintenance of the temples in Sethunadu, as well as their goodwill towards Christianity and the Islam. Architecture is inseparable from sculpture and painting. Architecture is the architecture of temples because there are no direct evidences of the mansions where the kings lived or the houses of the common people in the Sethunadu of Sethupathi. The Sethupathi kings were very religious but secular in rendering services . They were religious philanthropists and D.Burgess and Robert Sewell , basing inscriptional records, viewed that the Setupathis made a lot of grants to temples in the years, 1114, 1487,1500 and 1540. They ruled for a long time . They were called Sethupathis because Rama had appointed them as the guardians of the Sethu at Rameswaram when it was established. Of the seven categories of the Marava race, they were belonged to one category They had long been the rulers of Marava Country. The works they had done for heroism, wisdom, devotion, Tamil, and spirituality are amazing. Kilavan Sethupathi, Muthuramalinga Sethupathi, Bhaskara Sethupathi were known Marava kings of Ramnad. Of these, Bhaskara Sethupathi lived for about a century. He sent Swami Vivekananda to the World Conference of Religions which was held at Chicago, U.S.A on 14th September 1893 by his own money and made the World people to know the glorious past of India. On his return to Sri Lanka in 1897 he set foot in Rameswaram. The Setupathi asked Vivekananda to set his foot on his head .He had made numerous donations.1Sethupathis had donated many lands to the mosques and Dargahs of the Muslims.. Notable Islamic sites are dotted in the towns of Ervadi, Rameswaram, Ramanathapuram, and Kilakarai. In this research paper , the scholar highlights the pride of Sethupathis and the sacrifices rendered by them for the cause of secularism in their soil.



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KEYWORDS: Temples, Hindus, Muslims , Christians , Sethupathis , Worship, Religion, Ramnad, Tamil Country.

INTRODUCTION

Next to the Muvendars (Cheras, Cholas,Pandyas), and Pallavas in the cultural history of Tamil Nadu, the Sethupathis of Ramnad occupied an important place.² They had made immense contributions

in the field of religion, social service, and the development of Tamil language. They were prominent rulers from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries.³ Indeed, the Tamil Country was ravaged by foreign invaders like the Vadugars, the Marathas, and the Nawabs of Arcot. After the collapse of the Chola Empire, which adorned history of Tamil Country from the Eleventh to Twelfth Centuries A.D, the Later Pandyas emerged as powerful rulers. However, the Sethupathis, the Kings of Ramnad ruled a small autonomous region in Tamil Country. They made great achievements during this period. The temples in Thiruuthirakosamangai, Rameswaram, Thiruvadanaï, Thirukkottiyur, Thirupullani, and Kalaiyarkovil⁴ with their towering royal towers bear witness to the charity of the Setupathis. These restorations are still being made from the proceeds of hundreds of towns donated by these kings for the daily six-time, five-time worship and annual ceremonies and special orders in these temples. Similarly, these kings donated many villages to monasteries, inns, mosques, and churches.

The *Vedic* and *Vaishnava* shrines located in the *Seemai(Country)* of the Sethupathi kings have been revered as sacred for centuries. Among the sixteen temples that have been registered as *Thevara Pathigam* in Pandya Country, there are six temples in Sethupathi *Seemai* namely Rameshwaram, Thiruvadanaï, KalaiyarKovil, Tiruputhur, Thirukkotunkunram, Tiruchuzhiyal, and Tirupullani which are revered among the 108 divine places by *Vaishnava Acharyas*. Some other temples such as Koothangulam, which were rebuilt by the *Manavazha Mamunivar*, are also the ornaments of *Sethunadu*. The Sethupathi kings spent most of their annual revenue collected from the towns for the cause of the elevation of these temples. With this revenue, the temple administrators carried out the daily worships, ordinances, annual festivals, and special ordinances of the temples. King Bhaskara Sethupathi, who held the highest position in the history of the Sethupathis,⁵ made a full silver chariot for Ramanathaswamy to float on every Friday night.⁶ The same king also donated a beautiful palanquin for the temples of Kalaiyarkovil and Mylapore. Like these, the Sethupathi Kings made and donated many beautiful vehicles to many temples. King Regunatha Thirumalai Sethupathi also completed the construction of the Thirupullani Temple. King Regunatha Kilavan Sethupathi had completed the *kodimandapam* of the Nattarasankottai, *Kannudai Nayaki Amman* Temple, the Kalaiyarkovil Kalainathar Swamy Temple, and the Maha Mandapam. Throughout the construction of the Rameshwaram Temple, the Kings Kuttan Sethupathi, Dalaway Sethupathi, Thirumalai Regunatha Sethupathi, and Muthu Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi set up the first, second, and third divisions of the temple, the sanctum sanctorum, the *Ardha Mandapam*, the *Maha Mandapam*, and the access hall to show their godly devotion.

Rameshwaram Temple

Rameswaram is a city and a municipality in the present Ramanathapuram District of Tamil Nadu. The Pamban Bridge connects the island with the peninsula. The island of *Mannar* in Sri Lanka is about 50 kms from here. Rameswaram is the hub for trains from Chennai and Madurai. Rameswaram is considered by the Hindus as a holy place of worship parallel to Varanasi. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that Rama built a bridge to rescue his wife Sita from Sri Lanka. The Ramanathaswamy Temple in the heart of the Rameshwaram is dedicated to Lord Siva.⁷ Rama is believed to have worshiped Siva there. The temple is holy to both *Saivites* and *Vaishnavites*,⁸ the two major sects of Hinduism. The history of Rameswaram is revolved around the Ramanathaswamy Temple and the gateway to Sri Lanka. Rameswaram had been ruled by the Chola King Rajendra Chola (1012–1040) for some time. The island was under the control of the Jaffna government from 1215 to 1624. The King of Jaffna was called *Sethukavalan* and enriched the temple during the reign of the Hindu kings. The symbol *Sethu* was used on their coins and emblems. MalikKafur, the General of the Sultan Ala-uddin-Khilji of Delhi, arrived in the Fourteenth Century after overcoming the opposition of the Pandyas. Ala-uddin-Khilji established a mosque to commemorate the victory of Islam. In 1520 A.D., Rameswaram brought under the rule of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Sethupathis separated themselves from the control of the Madurai Nayaks and began to rule Ramnad independently. They greatly helped in the development of the Ramanathaswamy Temple. Mainly, Muthu Kumara Raghunatha Sethupathi and Muthu Ramalinga Sethupathi made the architecture of the temple as a masterpiece of architecture.⁹

Rameswaram Island has no mountains or rocks in the middle of the sea. Rameswaram Temple is 1500 years old. With 1212 huge pillars, 690 feet long and 435 feet wide, it has the world's largest walkway hall and stone temple. Rameswaram has huge boulders across the sea from Pamban. The temple is one of the longest temples in the world. King Muthuramalinga Sethupathi of Ramanathapuram completed the construction of the world-famous third corridor of the Ramanathaswam. In the proud core of Indian culture Rameswaram occupies a remarkable place. The reason for the fame of Rameswaram is its famous Ramanathasamy Temple and the sethupathis' contribution to the promoting of secular beliefs.

Ramanathaswamy Temple is located on a part of Rameswaram Island. Legend has it that on the way back to Ayodhya after defeating the Ravanadhi demons invading Sri Lanka, Rama worshiped the Lord Siva at Rameswaram for his killing Ravana and to dedicate a Shiva lingam set in the sand by Sita. The temple was small in size before the Twelfth Century. The King of Jaffana Pararajasekara helped Udayan Setupathi in the construction of main shrine of the temple. Even stones for the construction of this temple were brought from Jaffana. The Sethupathi also did some renovation in the *Ambigai* temple. It is said that Vijayanagara Prince Kumara Kampana visited the Rameswaram temple after his conquest of Madurai in 1371 A.D. It is believed that Viswanatha Nayak, the founder of the Madurai Nayak Kingdom, and some of his descendants made some changes in the temple. The Sethupathis of Ramnad rendered a lot of works in the Rameswaram temple during their rule. They were the *Dharma Kartas* of the Rameswaram temple. The revenue derived from many of the villages was donated to this temple. The Setupathis erected many portions in this temple. Sadaikka Thevar alias Udayan Sethupathi rebuilt the sanctum sanctorum of Ramanathasamy temple in 1618,¹⁰ *Artha Mandapa*, and Parvathavarthini *Amman* sanctum with black stones brought from Thirukonamalai. The *Nandi Mandapa*, and the *Artha Mandapa* were built by Kuthan Sethupathi in 1623. Dalaway Sethupathi (1636-1645) built the *Anumar Sannidhi*.¹¹ He built a part of the east tower of the temple. He also erected the *Sabapathi Sannidhi* in the north-eastern corner of the third *prakara*. During the period of Thirumalai Raganatha Sethupathi (1645-1670),¹² the renovation of Lakshman Swamy Temple was carried out.¹³ Vijayaragunatha Sethupathi (1710-1720) built the front hall (*Mandapa*) of the *Amman* temple in 1715. In 1740, Muthu Vijayaragunatha Sethupathi began the work of setting up the famous third *prakara*. The third *prakara* of temple construction was completed by Muthuramalinga Sethupathi in 1769. Sethupathi (*Mandapam*) Hall near the east tower gate was built in the year 1974 by Ramanatha Sethupathi.¹⁴ The Sethupathis rendered services not only to the Lord Ramanatha but also to the pilgrims of Rameswaram and Dhauskodi.¹⁵

Mosques and Churches

Many records and literary works illustrate the spread of Hinduism Jainism, Islam, and Christianity in Sethupathi *Seemai*. The Sethupathis of Ramnad followed *Saivism* and they were devotees of Lord Ramanathaswamy and Rajarajeswari *Amman*. Nevertheless, they even patronized Islam, Jainism, and Christianity.¹⁶ The history of the Tenth and Twelfth Centuries of Tamil Country indicates that the new religion, especially the one that trumpeted the monotheism of Islam, originated in the Seventh Century A.D. but flourished in *Pandya nadu* and *Sethunadu*. No document evidence is found to confirm the arrival of the Muslims earlier in *Sethunadu*. Sultan Seyed Ibrahim, who came from Arabia at the end of the Twelfth Century A.D., stayed with his companions in the Pandya Country, first in Korkai and then in Madurai and then in the Bouthira Manikkapattinam and was involved in the propagation of Islam. Due to this, Muslim settlements emerged in the port cities of *Sethunadu* such as Kilakarai, Periyapattinam, Devipattinam, Thondipattinam, and Sundarapandianpattinam.¹⁷ They often brought horses from Arabia to the Pandya Country and involved in the trading business and later entered into the administrative services.¹⁸ In course of time, the Muslim elites settled there and engaged in maritime trade in the coastal areas of Sri Lanka and the northern coastal states of Andhra Pradesh and Bengal. Their domestic and foreign trade relations were disrupted due to the Portuguese invaders who came to Tuticorin in 1502 A.D. Thus their trade relations with Kerala and the western coast of India developed. It is known that the year of Kollam was used in the inscriptions found in the mosques and

burial places of the Kilakarai and Vedalai. During the reign of King Thirumalai Sethupathi, the Muslims who were handloom weavers also widely involved in the coastal trade. Again during the reign of Kilavan Sethupathi, the close relations between Sethupathi and the Kilakarai VallalSeethakadi prevailed. Further, many Islamic saints from the western countries of Turkey, Arabia, and Persia came to *Sethunadu* and quietly engaged themselves in public welfare and religious propaganda.¹⁹ Over time, their burial places (tombs) have been revered as sacred places by the people. The religiously endowed Sethupathi Kings donated many towns to these places for providing alms in the name of Muslim saints. According to the inscriptional documents and copperplates now available, it is known that the Sethupathi Kings gave thirteen towns to ten sacred places.

The Christians, another minority in *Sethunadu*, were socially very backward in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. One of their churches is located in the village of Muthupet on the east coast. An inscription and a copperplate have been found for the grant of King Muthuramalinga Sethupathi's two villages, Muthupet and Tenchiyenthal, for its worship expenses.

Thurumadangal

Throughout history, it is known that many monks working in *Sethunadu* to inculcate religious fervor in the minds of the people. Among them, the Thiruvaduthurai *Adinam* and the Nanguneri Jiyar Swami's Monastery were run especially for the propagation of *Vaishnavism* and are still functioning. In addition, many small monasteries were operating in *Sethunadu*. According to the available records, there were twenty two monasteries operating at that time. Among them twenty one monasteries were ascribed to Saivism. The Bandari Nathar Madam in the Paramakudi circle was run by Vaishnavites. Most of these monasteries provided free water and buttermilk to passers-by and travellers. Daily Maheswara Puja was held at the Thiruvaduthurai Monastery in Thiruperundururai and food was provided to the devotees. The *Sethu* kings had donated forty one villages to these twenty two monasteries so that these charitable deeds are continuing.

Inns (Annachathiram)

Inns (rest houses for travellers with free provision for food), are prevailed during the reign of the *Sethu* kings. Hence all the people lived happily. According to various documents, the Sethupathi Kings provided daily food to the travellers who came to Rameswaram in the name of Sethu pilgrimage.²⁰ Literary history shows that the Rameswaram Temple was worshiped in the Seventh Century A.D. by Thirugnana Sambandar and Thirunavukar. According to the available documents, it is known that travellers from the states south of Vindhya Hill came to *Sethuyatra*. At that time there were three routes to Rameswaram from north to south, west to east, and south to northeast. The Sethupathi Kings set up inns on these routes to help and alleviate the tiredness and hunger of the travellers, who carried hundreds of travellers on foot, carrying a small piece of cloth on their heads, along these roads, which were not accessible to the public. Many of the halls (*Mandapas*) that functioned as inns are still in ruined condition along the Rameswaram route from the northern Chola region to the east coast and from Vembar in the northern part of Nellore *Seemai* to the east route via Sayalgudi, Uthirakosamangai, and Thirupullani.²¹

CONCLUSION

All of the above is not a story or fantasy. It is a testament to the scientific openness and artistic knowledge of the Sethupathis of Ramanad who lived hundreds of years. Today such contributions could not be realised. Hence it is necessary to realize the need to recreate cultural elements. Rameswaram is one of the most important holy shrines in India. Related to the history of the Ramayana period, Rameswaram is also the abode of Indian unity. The Kasi pilgrimage, considered to be one of the most important religious duties of the Hindus, begins in Kashi and ends after visiting Ramanathaswamy at Rameswaram. Rameswaram is one of the four major pious centres of the Hindus in the Indian subcontinent. These four holy centres are Rameswaram, Dwarka, Puri and Badrinath. Also Rameswaram is the only Shiva temple, with eleven of the twelve *Jyotirlinga* temples located north and south. The place

got its name from the worship of Easwaran by Ramaphran. The temple is sung by Thirunavukkarasar and Thirugnana Sambandar, and the hymns are sung by Arunagirinathar, Thayumanavar, Muthusami Dixit and many other high-ranking sages. Such a sacred and glorious temple is located on a conical island spread over an area of about 15 acres. Bathing in the twenty two holy *theerthams* located inside the temple is considered as a duty of the Hindus to purify their body and mind. Further, most of the Sethupathis of Sethunadu cherished religious tolerance and empathy was shown to the Christians, Muslims and Christians and hence the religious minority people lived peacefully in the Sethu Nadu. Their land and revenue donations to all religion contributed much to the path of secularism in Tamil Nadu in the passage of times.

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