

# Elephant Walk - A Rare Practice in Royal Land Donations in Medieval South India

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**Abstract:** *This study presents a captivating glimpse into the nuanced ceremonial practices of land donations during early and medieval South India, particularly highlighting the rarely discussed custom of piṭāgai naṭantu—a symbolic act involving a female elephant walking the perimeters of land to demarcate royal grants. It is evident that the ritual served not merely as a bureaucratic mechanism but as a grand gesture of imperial authority, sanctity, and spectacle, blending religious devotion with political symbolism. Through a detailed examination of Pallava and Chola copper plate inscriptions, the author skillfully uncovers a shift in donation protocols—from simple offerings to elaborate, orchestrated events involving temple elephants, village heads, and revenue officials. The act of the elephant tracing boundaries appears both literal and metaphorical, hinting at the ruler's desire to display dominion while evoking sacred legitimacy. This suggests that such rituals, though sparsely mentioned, were not isolated practices but reflections of a broader ideological framework—where even animals were imbued with spiritual and administrative significance. Taking this further, the recurring yet uneven presence of the ritual across dynasties raises intriguing questions about its political utility, religious symbolism, and eventual decline. The inquiry doesn't just chronicle history—it opens a door for deeper interdisciplinary studies linking epigraphy, anthropology, and religious customs. In sum, the article provides a thoughtful and engaging exploration of a unique, elephant-led ritual that stands as a marker of both cultural continuity and change in South Indian polity.*

**Keywords:** land donation, temple elephant, piṭāgai naṭantu, South Indian epigraphy, Brahmadeya rituals

Land grants to religious institutions and people related to holy places and its affairs; by the kings was a general pattern of donation in the down time in ancient and medieval south India. Some of the Sangam literary sources do speak about land donation, and sacrifices performed by rulers. A Pandian king of Sangam period (300 BC-300 CE) whose name renowned for performing innumerable sacrifices prefixed his name with title Pal yākačālai Mutukuṭumi Peruvaḷuti, meaning one who performed multiple sacrifices. The Satavahana family the well-known rulers of Deccan from the early 2nd century CE too known for such deeds from the pages of history. Their succeeding dynasties of Pallavas, Cholas, Pandiyas and Vijayanagar rulers never abstained from making such donations particularly land grants.

As time passed on the items of donation got multiplied and the purpose of it also witnessed a shift upward, if a graph drawn. Goods like land, gold, money, livestock, and articles like lamps, vessels and jewelry etc. But the most surprising aspect is donation of humans, both men and women as service providers. Leaving apart all other donations let us deal with only land accorded to temples and Brahmanas. The land eleemosynary to temples or gods were known as *tēvatānam* (*Devadanas*) and the single or group of the community referred, the brahmanas as *brammatēyam* (*Brahmadeyas*) is a known common fact to all related to the field of research in Indological studies of these mentioned periods of time and epigraphy.

This micro study is about the process of this particular land donation and understand the way it differed in course of time from all other items. Land appears to be the first donation as for as Siva and Vishnu temples are concerned. The royal donations were at times villages together. The Brahmadeyas were the land donations made for the bramanas as seen earlier. A peculiar pattern known as *piṭāgai naṭantu* could be noticed from the epigraphs since Pallava times. The Tamil terms nearest meaning is 'make the elephant to walk'.

When a ruler decided to create a brahmadeya or devadana then this custom of making the female elephant to walk around that specific village meant for donation was followed. Hence it is essential to surmise here about the practice; picking epigraphical evidences from the copper plates of Pallavas and Cholas dealing with the creation of new brahmadeyas and devadanas.

The first question that requires a brief is about *piṭāgai naṭantu*. The whole process in the way it was conducted is the female elephant was allowed to walk at its will with the assistance of a Mahut when they received the order from the monarch. The village and Nadu heads besides the revenue officials too accompanied the elephant. All the places covered on all four directions are noted down by the concerned officials in minute details. The boundaries were demarked by planting milk bush and boundary stones. Thus, the whole large piece of land covered by the elephant would form the land donation by the king. The elephant reached its own place by the evening. Generally, the elephant walk began in the morning towards eastern direction then proceeded to south, followed to the west and concluded by touching the north. After this ceremony the donation was executed.

A Complete scrutiny of Pallava copper plates informs us that this practice was mentioned only in four copper plates in the whole Pallava period of three centuries with Kanchipuram as Capital, viz 1. Raya Kottai 2. Kasakkudi, 3. Velur Palayam and 4. Bahur plates all falling in the 8th and 9th century CE more or less in the closing centuries of the dynasty [1].

Now, getting in to details the earliest reference is noticed in the Raya Kottai inscription of Skanda Shishya Varman II in his 15th regnal year. He is considered to be none other than Narasimhavarman himself and this copper plate is supposed to fall around 750 CE. The contents of the copper plate speak about a brahmadeya created and accorded to some Madhava Sharma Bhattan of Vatsa gotra. The gifted village was

Carkkuṛ situated in Mēl Aṭaiyāru nadu division of Paṭavūr kōṭṭam. The inscription goes like this.....

‘....நாட்டார்க்கும் கொட்டத்தார்கும் எழுதி  
திருமுகம் அருள்செய்து விடுதக அது  
கண்டு நாட்டாரும் கொட்டத்தாரும் தொழுது  
தலைக்கு வத்து கோவில் கரந்ததுக்கும்  
கோவில் யானக்கும் முன்னாய் கல்லும்  
கள்ளியும் நாட்டி கொடுத்து விடுந்த  
அறயோலைப்படி...’

‘....Nāṭṭārkkum koṭṭattārkum eḷuti tirumukam aruḷcceytu  
viṭutaka atu kaṇṭu nāṭṭārum koṭṭārum toḷutu talaikku vattu  
kōvil karantukku kōvil yānakkum muṇṇāy kallum kaḷḷiyum  
nāṭṭi koṭuttu viṭunta arayōlaippati...’

‘....the order of the king was written and sent to the heads of  
Nadu and Kottam. They worshipped, received and carried on  
head. They further marked the boundaries with stick and  
milk-bush in front of the temple Karanam and temple  
elephant.....’

The description given in the copper plate informs us that the  
whole procedure was done in the presence of Karanam, the  
temple head and temple elephant but do not deliberate any  
more details. Karanam is generally taken for village headship.  
But here the term koyil Karanam may particularly be assumed  
as a Karanam for temple affairs. Apart from this it does not  
help us to make a clear picture of how the process of piṭāgai  
naṭantu was carried out. It can be assumed in both ways either  
the procedure was ceremonially carried out in front of them  
involving as witness. Meaning they both, the person  
concerned and the animal were just present on the site and it  
was completed. The other possibility is that both the man and  
the temple elephant walked literally along the borders and  
was marked. Purely the epigraph leaves it to our imagination  
here perhaps due to being the first instance. Anyway, the take  
home point for us is for the first time there was a shift in the  
process of donation where the temple head and temple  
elephant could be noticed.

Next inscription is from Kasakudi. This inscription is from  
Nandivaraman Pallava III issued in his 22nd regnal year  
which is about 753CE and this is the second inscription that  
mentions about the presence of elephant let us see what the  
copper plates tell us in detail. This was again a brahmedeya  
donation to Chetty Rang Somaji. The land is located in  
Uttarakhand Sudhir. Royal Order has been referred to the  
Natar of Uttarakhand Kottam it is mentioned but as per the  
sayings of, *nāṭṭu viyavaṇ* going round the area with the  
elephant the boundaries has been marked with stone and milk  
bush. In this copper plate we get the term *piṭāgai valam ceytu*  
which means ‘making the elephant to go round’ in this copper  
plate we do not get the information if the elephant was the  
temple elephant or not but the practice of going round with  
the elephant and marking the boundaries is very clearly said  
about.

The third copper plate that comes as a source for the presence  
of elephant in the process of making a brahmadaya is from  
Pattathal Mangalam in the time of Nandi Varma II on his 61st  
regnal year which is equal to 792CE. In this copper plate also,

it is very clearly mentioned that the Nattar worshipped and  
took it on their head, made elephant go round the borders and  
installed sticks and milk bushes as markers.

The last and final copper plate is from Bahur. It is for *Vidya  
Bogam* that is for the causeway of promotion of education  
during the time of Nirubatunga Varma on his 8th regnal year  
that is 877 -78 CE. In this copper plate it is very clearly stated  
that the elephant was made to go round and the boundaries  
were marked as usual with sticks and bushes.

Thus, we have 4 inscriptions talking about the new process of  
taking female elephant around the borders and demark the  
boundaries as per the usual pattern with sticks and milk  
bushes. It is noted only in the first copper plate Raya Kottai  
that the elephant belonged to the temple and in rest of the  
inscriptions no ownership of elephant is indicated. Despite  
still it can be assumed that the elephants belonged to the  
temples as maintaining an elephant is not anyone’s cup of  
coffee. Thus, the process of using the elephant in accorded  
Brahmadeyas and Vidya Bogam are very much visible from  
the afore said inscriptions. Another point of interest we could  
note that it began in the second half of 8th century CE and  
continued in the ninth century also.

When we arrive to the time of the Cholas we find 17 copper  
plates covering a time period of 922 – 1207 CE. Among them  
we find the presence of female elephant ceremonially walking  
around the borders of the donated land obviously in six copper  
plates right from the time of Paranthaka I onwards [2]. The  
copper plates mentioning female elephant’s presence range a  
time period between 932- 1037 CE. This is a puzzle again  
whether we are supposed to assume that all the Chola kings  
followed the practice in the 12th and 13th century or not as  
they are not mentioned in the copper plates despite the copper  
plates are available till the early phase of 13th century.

Among all the copper plates Thiruvallangadu copper plate of  
Rajendra I (1018 CE) [3] appears to be the watermark of the  
utilization of the elephant walk. In that copper plate we find  
the minute details and description of the all four borders  
including turns that elephant took while walking. With the  
help of which one can easily draw a map of Thiruvallangadu  
village itself. The author’s own experience in 2006 [4] also  
reveal the same thus, we see the female elephant has been  
used in the ceremony invariably in *Devdhanas Brahmadeyas  
Vidya Bogam* and *Paḷḷiccantam* [5].

Now the question arises what may be the reason to associate  
a temple elephant or any elephant would be in a royal  
donation especially to the holy places and to the people  
attached. The reason obviously one can imagine is that to add  
more clout pomp and glory of the instance. Perhaps that was  
to present a bigger picture or a magnificent picture of the  
ruling apparently to the common public. It also dealt with the  
show of strength or power and stability of the empire. Thus, a  
new practice which developed just in the 8th century perhaps  
lasted till 13th century. Of course, it was not practiced by the  
Vijayanagar kings who came later on. That may be due to the  
shift in the purpose of donation from land to food donation  
and the reason may be the same to them.

At the same time, we should draw our attention to the saying of a book Tolkāppiyam grammar book written in the early Sangam era by Tolkāppiyāṇār mentions apart from human being the 6th sense was present in animals and birds like elephant and parrot. Further research scientific and epigraphic may or may not accept the idea. Moreover, we are aware that every animal has a territory small or big where they return back for night stay. In India no one could have missed the scene of street dogs barking and fighting as a stray dog enters their area or territory. The monarchs when used elephant were they also aware and used it with this conscience is another quarry left unanswered. Thus, this article has more chances for future Researchers to take up. But simple conclusion to us is that a special practice of involving temple elephant perhaps as a representative of God in the process of donation by rulers of early mediaeval and mediaeval South India just ranging from 8th century onwards to 13th century, while that was not seen in the other areas of present India.

## References

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