

CONDITION OF PEASANT COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONALS FROM SANGAM AGE TO CHOLA AGE IN TAMILNADU – A STUDY

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Introduction

Agriculture flourished and improved during the early period particularly in the lands round the Mediterranean. It revolutionised the whole course of man's life and enabled him to lead a settled life. Such facts enabled him to dominate the nature. But at that time the knowledge of agriculture was slow/a gained. It began to spread slowly and for centuries the old and new ways of life coincided with one another. In the same way Tamil country, without any exception, also devoted attention to agriculture from time immemorial. Hence it widens the scope to estimate the various facts associated with agricultural pursuits and agriculturists during the period that ranges from the Sangam Age to 1070 A.D. So it is a must to understand the top priority assigned to the agricultural pursuits and product of food materials through agriculture. So one has to have a portrayal of the agriculture and agriculturists of the Tamil Country through the ages upto 1070 A.D.

Peasant Community

Velankudi was the general name assigned to the peasant community. As they were honest-workers they did not aspire for the wealth of others. They led an Independent life and as they deeply loved their profession they devoted to agriculture. The peasants did not lead a sophisticated life but lived in small huts, which were encircled by mud walls and thatched roofs. The land was the hereditary possession of the ryots.¹ The Sangam society comprised of different sets of professionals, which formed the basis for the future caste system. The same trend continued throughout Tamilnadu during the period of this study. During the reign of Raja Raja (985-1014 A.D.) the Vellalas, indulged in agricultural activities were treated as a venerable separate caste. The agriculturists generally known as Vellalar did not deviate from their commitment to agriculture.²

Generally the Chola monarchs were interested in bringing the agricultural labours as slaves from the captivated areas. They were settled at different colonies specially established for the peasants.³ The Tamil Pallis and Vellalar were included among them. The Chola Purva Pattayam also attests this fact. The tillers were generally called by the term Ulavar and the peasants were rarely known as Ulavar. So it will not be wrong to consider that the Vollar

must have derived from the term Velanmai. Since the caste system during Sangam Age emerged on the basis of profession it will not be wrong to infer that the Vellalar emerged from their occupation called Vilahmai.⁴ As the Ulavar was people engaged in agriculture, the field also known as kalam associated with agriculture the peasants were known as kalamar. The Vellalars lived in the marudam region, which comprised of doab regions and deltas. They were even classified as people belonged to the fourth Varna. But it must also be remembered that Chatur Varna system has developed. The Vellalars were closely associated with samaikudi i.e., they were people who cultivated *samai*.⁵

Peasants Professionals

The peasants, who were Vellalar, Ulavar, Kalamar etc. were noted for their noble services, because they assisted the life of the people of all walks of life. Since the services of the peasantry were mostly executed on different kinds of agricultural fields called *Kalam*, as seen earlier they were known as Kalamar. Their involvement in the profession called *ulavu* gained them the name *ulavar*. As they were engaged in the cultivation of different varieties of paddy and sugarcane the name Inakkalamar was offered to them.⁶ There were different sets of agriculturists. There were people who had subordinate cultivation rights, were particularly known as "kil karanmai udaya kudigal". The trained tillers, who were subordinated to others, were known as *tondaulavar*. They were engaged in agriculture as paid servants and were wage earners.⁷

Like the *tondaulavar*, ordinary laymen were hired for carrying out the different kinds of agricultural activities. For harvesting paddy there were separate set of people who were called *arinar*. Since they used sharp sickle they were generally known as *nel ari toluvar*. The term Vennel arinar will testify to the above fact. For irrigating the fields, through the sluice from the tanks, separate set of labourers was employed. Such facts stand to prove that there existed the system of division of labour in agrarian pursuits. To carry out the duties without any strain the farmers were having the habit of consuming intoxicating liquor. They were even used to sing while doing agricultural activities to be free from the problem of tiredness.⁸ Their regular and constant services enabled them to gain experience in farming and they became experts. The tillers who utilised the paddy preserved for future sowing as food were called by the name *vilkudi*. This practice of improper use of the seed was found common only among the economically backward and downtrodden group. There was a separate set of people called *kavalar* who were employed as security guards of the ripened paddy and other cornfields. They were further known as *enal kappor*.⁹ Erinvilunar were people whose main occupation was agriculture. The paddy fields were also protected by a separate set of people called *Kalani kavalar*. Ulupadai was an honorary title assigned to the ryots for they were also more in number like the armed forces, which saved the people from their foes and enemies. There were separate labourers who were engaged in cutting the thick and hollow stalks of paddy. Kalainar were people engaged specifically for removing the weeds from the fields. It was a practice among the tillers themselves to devote on sowing the seeds as soon as they obtained sufficient water by rain. Due to their talents and efficiency

they obtained the title Vankai Vinalgnar. The Pallars were mostly agricultural labourers and their women were experts in transplantation of paddy even from the early days onwards. Another set of people called Parayar, who were downtrodden and were at the bottom of the social ladder, were mostly agricultural labourers. Vegetarianism was the main practice of the Vellilas because they were either Saivites or Vaishnavites.¹⁰ This suggests that caste or religious disparities did not prevent the agriculturists in carrying out their functions. The landowners were called "kaniyalar kondaikattiyar". They were named so because of their hairstyle. Kodikkalar (those who served in betel-leave garden) were certain notable groups among the Vellalars. Such facts testify to the availability of groups among the peasant community. The Kadaiyyar were labourers or slaves employed in the execution of mean activities. Those who were involved in toddy tapping were ilavar. As the agricultural labourers were wage earners and were given salary by cash or kind. They were allowed to settle at specific areas. In the same way the oxen used for agrarian activities were reared by separate set of people. The transplantation activities were executed by separate set of people who were experts in the art.¹¹

Conclusion

The above facts indicate that the peasant community was functioning as a separate but recognised group in the Tamil country throughout the ages. They were even venerated because they were people who were the lords of the people of all the areas. Thus the agrarian life of the Tamil society was centering on division of labour, which in turn caused social divisions and economic disparities. It is also obvious that while the farmers were given veneration and recognition to the labourers' position was not so appreciable and they were only occupying the status of slaves.

End Notes

1. C.Meenakshi, *Administration and social life under the Pallavas*, Madras, 1977, p. 15 and p. 62
2. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXII, p. 260.
3. H. La. Fanu, *Manual of Salem District in the Presidency of Madras*, Vol. I, Madras, 1883, p. 34.
4. F.J. Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer-Salem*, Vol. I, Part I, Madras, 1918, p. 122.
5. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 24.
6. Porunararuppada: 193-94.
7. Tirumandangkudi: 94.
8. Aharianuru: 40:12-13, 236:4
9. Puranantiru: 230:13,172:6
10. B.S. Baliga, *District Gazetteer, Tanjore*, Madras, 1957, p. 134.
11. S.I.I., Vol.VI, No. 58.