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Iron Age economy: A study in agrarian expansion in early Tamilnadu

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Abstract

Archaeological studies in Tamilnadu is a multifaceted one, which includes the study of varied cultural features. The diffusion of various cultural features led to the prosperity of ancient Tamil country. The unearthed materials due to their uniqueness exposed the socio-cultural status of the ancient Tamil people. In Tamilnadu Iron age followed closely the heels of Neolithic period and there is no any cultural hiatus between them. Of all the other cultural periods, Iron age was considered much more important as it is a period of introduction of metal technology i.e., Iron. The introduction of iron resulted in the development of socio-cultural and economic condition of the ancient Tamil country.

Keywords: *Iron Age, Aintinai, Purananooru and Agananooru*

1. Introduction

Archaeological studies in Tamilnadu is a multifaceted one, which includes the study of varied cultural features. The diffusion of various cultural features led to the prosperity of ancient Tamil country. The unearthed materials due to their uniqueness exposed the socio-cultural status of the ancient Tamil people. In Tamilnadu Iron age followed closely the heels of Neolithic period and there is no any cultural hiatus between them. Of all the other cultural periods, Iron age was considered much more important as it is a period of introduction of metal technology i.e., Iron. The introduction of iron resulted in the development of socio-cultural and economic condition of the ancient Tamil country. The areas which were once densely forested and inaccessible were cleared and were made fit for occupation by the people. It made a great renaissance in the society, which later was instrumental for the emergence of various well civilized societies. "Archaeology shows that Tamilakam was more or less a single culture zone by the first millennium B.C, with the diffusion of iron using people with black and red ware tradition"¹. Though the Iron Age habitational areas and burial relics occur comparatively widespread in Tamilnadu, the latter over comes the earlier one in quantity. Language, perhaps Tamil on the ancient vocabulary among others in the world was an vital factor which resulted in the cultural unification in this black and red ware culture. Apart from this aspect, there seems to be some uneven material cultures, which is actually considered to be a historical reality. But the people who developed these cultures had no major role in shaping a integration among the unevenly developed community though the manufacture of iron tools and their technology was known to them. "Archaeological knowledge of the ancient agriculture of South India is primarily based on the finds of Adichanallur, which gives us some idea about the thrust and drawhoes and the actual ploughshares of 1000 B.C."². The ancient Tamil literary works also depict the process of agriculture practised, the crops grown, the technology used etc. The aspects of agrarian policies and their expansion in the ancient Tamil country during the Early Iron Age culture are discussed in this paper in a brief account.

The ancient Tamil texts have very high historical values as they expose the culture of ancient Tamil society. So, the content and concepts in the Tamil anthologies could not be ignored. Whatever be their drawbacks as literary compositions based on oral poetry with stock-expressions and stereotypes, the richness of ancient Tamil anthologies in historical details can never be exaggerated.³ Though scholars on the ancient Tamil literary works propose varied chronological sequences for the ancient Tamil texts, on the basis of their classifications, complications and editions, these literary works serve as an invaluable source

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for the study of ancient history of Tamil country. The most important among the studies is about the Iron age cultural features. Anthologies detail the ancient burial monuments, rituals performed, mode of erection of the burials etc.

It is not that the “Aintinai concept is just a poetic representation, as the physiographical features of Tamilnadu favours the five folded divisions in the historical and anthropological aspects. There is not much meaning in discerning social condition in the concept, since all situations are marks of uneven development coexisted simultaneously”.⁴ The thoughts regarding the actual order of the five *tinai*s as provided for in the literature are also therefore meaningless.⁵ Indeed, the ancient Tamil poets correlated land and nature for their classification of various divisions i.e., Aintinai. The study on the life style and activities of every division referred by the poets reveals a clear picture about the five types of terrains namely *Kurinji* (the hill and its bounding areas), *Mullai* (forest and surrounding areas), *Marutham* (cultivated tracts), *Neithal* (coastal areas), *Palai* (withered zone) and their respective economical activities viz. hunting and food gathering, stock-raising and shifting agriculture, commodity production and agricultural activities, fishing and salt manufacturing, plundering and cattle lifting.

Hunters and food gatherers were called *Vetar* (Silapathigaram - 12:4-4), cattle keepers and shifting agriculturists as *Aayar*, *Kuravar* (Kalithogai - 101:34, 47, Silapathigaram - 63,13-14), the agriculturists were called as *Ulavar* (Narrinai - 3:5, 97:9, Ainkurunooru - 3:4), fishermen and salt manufacturers were called as *Valayar*, *Minavar*, *Paratavar* (Kurunthogai - 184:6, Porunararrupadai - 218, Narrinai - 4:1), *Umanar* (Narrinai - 4:7, 138:3, 183:5, 257:17, Agam - 17:13), cattle lifters were called as *Eyinar* (Kurunthogai - 12:3, Ainkurunooru - 363:2, 364:1, Agam - 79:14, 319:3) and *Kallar* (Kalithogai - 81:23). This proves the broad and horizontal evolution and development of people who were separated by certain physiographical conditions. But sometimes this situation varies as the cultural aspects of Kurinji and Mullai divisions overlapped. Hunting and food gatherers of the kurinji division were able to take shifting agriculture, as they had slopes which were easy to cultivate i.e., *Punam* (Kurunthogai - 82:4, 131:4, 142:2, 151:1, 188:2, Ainkurunooru - 284:3, Kalithogai - 37:13) and *Enal* (Malaipatukadam - 108, Kalithogai - 37:12, 39:7, 40:3, Agam - 12:6, 32:1).

In Purananooru (159) poet Perunchitthiranan refers about *Vetar* of Kolli hills where they involved in slash and burning agriculture. In the same work (231:1) poetess Avvaiyar refers about the Kuravars while mentioning about the performance of death rituals of Athiyaman.

The lands were classified into two agrarian divisions as *Vanpulam* and *Menpulam*. *Vanpulam* is a miscellaneous non - agrarian land mentioned in (Pathirrupathu - 75:8, Puram - 395:2) and *Menpulam* is the agrarian land mentioned in (Puram - 395:1). Purananooru (335:7) refers to the four cheif clans of vanpulam viz. *thudiyar*, *paanan*, *paraiyan*, *kadamban*, on the basis of their religious musical instrumental practices. Here it is only referred as they had supported a soldier during a clash between the local community, not in the concept of farming. But the menpulam land which is prominently used for cultivation had known the use of *eruthu* (bullocks - kurunthogai 388:4, pathirrupathu - 27:13, puram - 102:1, 289:2) with a *nukam* (cross bar - Puram - 1201, 179:9, Agam - 159:2, 224:4, Pathirrupathu -

63:15) and a *Meli* (Puram - 63:15) or *Nanjil* (Ploughshare - Perumpanarrupadai - 199, Pathirrupathu - 19:17, 25:1, Paripadal - 1:5, 4:39, 20:53) which should obviously be made of iron for furrowing.

The marutham land would have probably been irrigated by the tank irrigation which was the prominent irrigational system in ancient Tamil country. This tank irrigation (*Ayam* - Puram - 62:1, 68:2) and the presence of small dams (*Sirai* - Puram - 76:11, 200:9, 208:19) were mentioned in the anthologies. These tanks and dams were enough to fulfill the needs of agriculture. The iron technology supported the developed agricultural economy and other peoples like artisans and craftsmen, who were somehow related to the farming culture. Well established economy of the marutham land also made the people of other divisions like Kurinji, Mullai, Neithal to exchange their products with the people of Marutham.

This well-developed economy also led to the emergence of various classifications in the society i.e., land owners, who were the aristocrats, scholars (Brahmins, Warrior chiefs, Merchants) and land less. The land owners were called *Uyarnidor* (Agam - 387-18, 213:10, 221:6, Kurunthogai - 233:4, 74:2) and land less were called *Ilisinar* (Puram - 82:3, 170:5, 287:2). The low born included the tillers, artisan, craftsmen, jobless wanderers, etc. Their settlements were called as *Puracceri*. We don't not know much about the exact relations of production in the menpulam, though we have noted that structured division of labour existed there. It appears that the tillers produced and the craftsmen worked for the land-owning chieftains, the pulavar and the warrior chiefs. The land owners in Vanpulam and Menpulam were called as namely *Natan* and *Uran* and the owner of the neithal was called *Cerpan* (Puram: 49)

Gift giving was the institution through which the resources of both Vanpulam and Menpulam were redistributed⁶. Gifts were distributed to the people like scholar (Pulavars), less - bards (Panar), warrior - chief etc. For the day to day needs people plundered the products which travelled through their land division. Poverty was the main reason to make them involve in this type of activity. The chieftains were also depended upon by a large group of wandering lesser bards. The economy was based on the gift - giving process. This in its process involved mutual plunders through which functioned the redistribution of resources in its instituted form.

The poverty of the vanpulam landowner and people is mentioned in (Puram 127, 327, 328, 329). In contrast to the vanpulam, the cheiftains and people of menpulam were wealthy enough to compensate their needs. The large paddy farms and their stock was mentioned in (Puram - 353). Here the poet Karikannanar mentions about a cheiftain whose paddy fields are like paddy heaps. In Puram (391), poet Kalladanar speaks about the paddy stock of a cheiftain Poraiyarrukilan. The study of ancient Tamil anthologies, the materials unearthed that are related to the ancient society etc. shows that it is necessary for the people to depend on the so called land owner or cheiftains in the contemporary economic life. Hence, it would be an important aspect that the lesser bards (*Panar*) and other poor people wrote songs in praising about the local cheiftain to get their needs fulfilled. The poverty of panars is mentioned in Kurunthogai (19:1), the same poem in another verses (127:5-6) mentions the low status of the panars. Also the scholars sang in praise of cheiftains for getting lands and gold as the gifts. So the

gift giving was initially a process which segregated the society on the economic status and it led to the social changes in the society.

Another important aspect of the ancient Tamil country responsible for economic change on the basis of agrarian expansion was plunder – raids. This was considered to be a fundamental process in the proper maintenance of contemporary economy. There was proper ethics for the ancient Tamils which they had believed to be instrumental on the wars. The contemporary ethics justified the wars and plunder raids. The institutionalized or segmentation in the wars were known from the descriptions of *Vetchi* (Cattle raid), *Karanthai* (Cattle retrieving), *Vanchi* (Attack over the territory to expand power), *Kanchi* (Defending the territory), *Uzhingai* (Attack over the Fort), *Nocchi* (Defending the Fort from the enemies), *Thumbai* (common place selected for war), *Vagai* (Getting victory after killing the enemies and rejoicing), *Padan* (Praising the victorians), *Pothuviyal* (incidents that didn't happen in any of the above activities), *Kaikilai* (Bonded relation or affection on one side of the people – either male or female), *Perunthinai* ().

Each ethic had a concept to be performed for the welfare of the society or community. One of the inevitable parts of the war is the destruction of cultivated lands. In Puranaanooru (7, 16) in *Mazhapulavanji thurai* the plundering and the destruction of settlements are mentioned in detail. Same work (15) authored by Nettimmai in praise of Pandyan Palyahasalai Muthukudumi Peruvazhuthi mentions how the crops and fertile lands were destroyed by the king by using the horses and huge elephants. Likewise other verses of Puranaanooru (57, 23, 297, 16) even mention in detail about the atrocities of the chieftains that were imposed over the fertile lands.

It is known that peasants were neither warriors by themselves, nor were they offered sufficient protection by their chieftains. The warrior – power of the chieftains was often not enough to defend against the onslaughts. The chieftains mobilized warrior arousing tribal loyalty in them through *corruvilavu*, wherein the bards sang so as to strengthen the loyalty to the chieftain. The chieftains themselves with words of honour gave drinks with their own hands to the warrior – chiefs intensifying the bond and loyalty.

The awareness about the danger of wars which destroyed agriculture was discussed in the Tamil anthologies. Puram (18) mentions that the growth of agriculture was on the basis of chieftains wealth. The protection of peasants was the main concept of the poems as they were only responsible for the agricultural products. The need of agriculture was important for the poets even to give a image for the reason of war situation.

The production of agricultural commodities confined to the valley of Kaveri, Vaigai, Thamirabarani and other rivers. So it could be assumed that the production in other regions which initially belonged to vanpulam division was based on exchange of commodities. But the introduction of Iron technology earlier and manufacture of tools also had a low impact in the development process till 5th - 6th century A.D. So this shows that the organized agrarian settlements when came into existence compensated the production of agricultural goods. The use of technology of iron ploughshare was known to the people of ancient Tamil country. But the introduction of this technology did not made any drastic change in the first few centuries of the Christian

Era. On the basis of the ancient Tamil Literary works it is known that the advanced production centers called Menpulam were surrounded by large non-agrarian regions, Vanpulam of uneven economies of the subsistence level. Knowledge of iron technology alone does not lead to the expansion of advanced production. In order to develop the agrarian culture there was a need to organize the peasants either through compulsion or by creating a false consciousness on the chieftains, they are living under. So, it was here the highly scholared people of those time, the Brahmanas got a special status among the people and of course in the royal courts.

In the late 5th - 6th century A.D, the Brahmanas have been gifted with lands by royal people. Pathirrupatthu (Seventh patthu - Pathikam:9) mentions about the gift of a village called *Ohandur* to the Brahmanas by Chera ruler Selvakadungo Vazhiyadhan. By assessing the importance enjoyed by the Brahmanas in the society, it could be presumed that the lands they got as gift would have been the ones which were obtained through plunder - raids in the war situations. The chieftains who used the peasants in the wars had hardly any interest to involve the peasants to practise the advanced technology that would have led to the developed agrarian economy. Even the land owners didn't show any interest in organising the peasant community to use them in production process. As a sequence the new group of organised community namely Brahmanas emerged. The Brahmanas who enjoyed sophisticated life on the royal courts of Pallavas, Pandyas, Cholas etc. had controlled the peasant economy.

With a brief view on the above informations it is evident that people of Early Iron age was not institutionally organised, which led to the stagnancy in the economic development in ancient Tamil country. Though the manufacture of iron and its technology was known to the people around 1000 B.C itself due to the unorganised society, it hardly proved any improvement in the agricultural productivity in subsequent times. Land wise classification of the people and their work showed there existed a society which was based on the occupation and on the ecological conditions they experienced. Infact in the emergence of another community namely Brahmanas who organised the people for the purpose of making use of them in the land they owned which they obtained as gifts from chieftains and royal courts was a sequel to the above.

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