



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

AGRICULTURE AND AGRICULTURISTS IN ANCIENT PERIOD AT TIRUNELVELI REGION – HISTORICAL STUDY

KEY WORDS: Agriculture, Tirunelveli, Agriculturists

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Tamils and that was compelled them to assign greater veneration to that profession. Agriculture was a prime need of the people for having their food stuffs. Agriculture was the back-bone of the Indian Economy; it has been highly honored and respected by the common people of TamilNadu State. Tirunelveli District was not an exception. Most of the people of this region directly or indirectly depended upon agriculture. Majority of the people lived in a rustic life in the villages. The cultivation of paddy and vegetables being principal items of food of the people of this region, compelled to engage themselves in Agriculture operations. That also compels one to have a portrayal of the agriculture and agriculturists of the Tamil country during the period mentioned earlier. This papers gives explanations about the glory of Tirunelveli District, land, soil and season of Tirunelveli District. And also this paper pointed out the elucidation on Agricultural implements, Ploughing, Irrigational System, Rivers, Tanks, Peasant community, Profesionals and Labourers and Taxation in Tirunelveli District.

INTRODUCTION

“Agriculture, flourished and improved, particularly in the lands round the Mediterranean”, revolutionized the whole course of man's life. It enabled man to lead a settled life. Man could plan as per the nature's plan of rain, heat and cold and start cultivating the land and produce as per the requirement of the population. Knowledge of agriculture was slow to spread among the people and for centuries the old and new ways of life existed side by side.”¹ As such the fertile region in Tamil country without any exception was devoted to agriculture from time immemorial.² Hence it widens the scope to estimate the various facts associated with agriculture and agriculturists during the period that range from the Ancient to medieval period. As Food, clothing and shelter are the prime and essential requirements of every human being in life, one can understand the top priority assigned to the production of food materials through agriculture³.

THE GLORY OF TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT

Tirunelveli, the penultimate southern most district of Tamil Nadu, is described as a microcosm of the state, owing to its mosaic with diverse geographical and physical that is ; lofty mountains and low plains, dry Teri structures, rivers and cascades, seacoast, thick inland forest, sandy soils and fertile alluvium and variety of flora, fauna of wild life. Tirunelveli, the name has been concocted from the three Tamil words that is “Tiru-Nel-Veli” that is “Scared Paddy Hedge”⁴. It is properly named as Tirunelveli purporting to mean the land surrounded by beautiful paddy fields. It is roughly triangular in shape and it is one among the costal districts in south eastern part of the country. The district consists of all the five geographical divisions referred to in Tamil literature. The Western Ghats form the **Kurinji** region, kalakkadu and Mun danthurai forests form the **Mullai** region, lands watered by the Tamiraparani and other rivers fall under **Marudam** region. The Radhapuram sea coast in its **Neithal** land and the teri land forms the **Palai** region⁵. The districts possess multi religious people in nature. There are saivite, Vaishnavite, Christian and Islamic centres of divinity helps to have good **Irrigation** and fame.

LAND AND SOIL

Since the preparation of the soil was the initial aspect of farming as mentioned by **Pattinappalai**⁶, the primary effort of agriculture must be studied. “The reduction and expansion regularly of land was a continuous process. This may be regarded as the ecological concomitant of the social development and assimilation of tribal people”. “The prosperity of agricultural economy depends to a large extent on the facilities provided for irrigation and the importance of securing an adequate water supply was recognized in south India from very early times⁷.” The Tamil country, especially

Tirunelveli district which was not an exception.

SEASONS

The **Vellalars** settled in the fertile region long before the first century of the Christian era, probably due to the perennial flow of water in the river **Tamiraparani** which aided the irrigation of the fields sufficiently. It indicates that agriculture, a systematic industry and sola occupation of the Tamils which was mostly based on the natural water resources⁸. As such it is also obvious that the farmers, who depended upon their land properties, assigned importance to seasons which offered sufficient water supply for their occupation. As they relied upon the rain, which caused prosperity, one can estimate the importance assigned to seasons. The arrival of rainy season with thunder and lightning was considered as the forecast of prosperity. The cool breeze, which proceeded the rainy season, enabled the Tamils to expect the short arrival of rain and that stands to prove the knowledge of the seasons of the Tamil farmers. The agrarian set up was based on rain and the agriculturists were fascinated in welcoming the rainy season with joy and happiness⁹. The association of the **kuravai** dance with the rainy season will indicate the prominence of rain.

AGRICULTURAL IMPLEMENTS

Another significant aspect of agricultural prospects is the use of various implements. It is quite obvious that modern scientific and technological measures would not have found their place in the then agriculture. Such facts would not have prevented them from employing different implements. So to have knowledge of the implements used and the techniques adopted in using them an estimate of such acts becomes necessary and it will widen the scope of having a thorough knowledge of the agrarian life¹⁰.

As it was a common custom of reclaiming lands for cultivation during the sangam age, the same tradition continued during the succeeding period too. The pallavas who were called by the name **Kaduvettis**¹¹ will attest this fact. As rightly observed by K.A Nilakanta sastr¹² the Tamils gradually brought the waste lands under the plough by employing various measures such as tax concessions and remissions etc. Further various inscriptional evidences, which expose such facts, compel the dissertations to estimate them to have a detailed account of the agrarian life of the ancient and medieval people in Tirunelveli region.

The farmers of the ancient Tamil country especially in this region had given importance to some specific kinds of agricultural implements. The tillers who were known as **error** were depending always upon **error**¹³ ploughshare. Ploughshare was considered as the basic prerequisite for agriculture. Its significance can be seen in the festival called

ermangalam and it is an appreciation of implement. They used a bent plough known as **kodumeli** with a cross iron tip¹⁴.

PLOUGHING

Agriculture, comparable to sacrifices, was carried out in a regular method. Agricultural activities were executed in a methodical routine way with all promptness¹⁵. It was realized that there will be bumper yield only when the lands were well prepared. As they were well aware of the fact that deforestation and creation of irrigation facilities like tanks are the prerequisites of agriculture. The wild waste grow in the lands were removed before ploughing and sowing the seed. Though no improved and mechanized forms of agriculture were available they had faith over the fact that co-operative joint Endeavour will offer a prosperous yield¹⁶.

Regular preparation of the land, proper manuring and sufficient ploughing were considered as the required practice of cultivation. The plough share was a prime wealth of the agriculturists¹⁷. It was also believed that sufficient ploughing was the fundamental aspect for achieving a good yield. The early Tamils, who had divided the lands to in **Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neidal** and **Palai**, were well aware of the fact that the plough could be used in proper soils¹⁸.

IRRIGATIONAL SYSTEM

A study of the irrigation measures associated with the farmers is also a must. As it is a significant factor in agriculture even today one has to notice the existence of this custom during the early periods. Since irrigation is a prominent and consistent aspect of the agrarian system one is bound to note the various types of irrigation methods employed in the early Tamil country. Along with the attention denoted to the sources and methods of irrigation it becomes imperative to concentrate on the maintenance and upkeep of those facilities. For estimating the causes for cultivating commercial crops, vegetables, fruits and flowers. The studies about the agricultural produces will highlight the social and economic features of the life of the cultivators. It will also bring out the uses of cultivated products. The ancient Tamil agriculturists were depending upon rain for agricultural activities²⁰.

RIVERS

River water formed the primary and principal irrigational resource. When they had water from the water falls during summer seasons, the farmers used to form channels on the banks of the rivers and that water irrigated the fields. The use of Tamiraparani water will attest this. Tamiraparani water, the perennial irrigation source was known even during the Sangam Age. The flood in the rivers was welcomed as a prominent source of irrigation. The river water was utilized by means of canals and such facts will be dealt with in the succeeding pages²¹.

TANKS

Water stored in the tanks was another irrigation source. The different descriptions of the term **kayam** i.e., the tank will substantiate this fact. The tanks were of different types such as the tanks having tortoise, the tanks of cold water, and deep tank. Kuttam was believed that the non-availability of water in the tank will destroy the paddy yield. There are references which suggest that wells were also used in addition to tanks²². Thus private individuals were keen on the promotion of irrigation facilities. The tank irrigation was a common feature even in this region. It is attested by the Dalavoyppuram copper plates because it refers to one **Kudinadai eri**²³.

PEASANT COMMUNITY

A study of the peasant community is required to notice by different types of people who were engaged in the multifaceted agrarian processes. As it was a prestigious social value to own at least a strip of land "it was the deliberate object of everyone whatever his occupation, to have a small plot of land

he could call his own". In addition to this there are ample references about the existence of communal ownership. The terms **Sabhamanjikam, Urmanjikam, and Urpodu**, suggest and corroborate the above facts. There are references about the availability of different kinds of labourers and wages they received. Digging was done at the rate of fifty **Kulis per Kasu** in 906 A.D²⁴. By employing the available primary and secondary sources the facts concerning the above aspects will be brought to light in the chapter on "Agriculture and Agriculturists.

PROFESSIONALS AND LABOURERS

The peasants, who were called by different names, were noted for their profession which assisted the life of the people. Since the services of the peasantry were executed on different kinds of fields called **Kalam**, as seen earlier they were known as **Kalamar**²⁵. Their involvement in the profession called **Ulavu** gained them the name **Ular**²⁶. As they were engaged in the cultivation of different varieties of paddy and sugarcane, the name **Inakkalamar**²⁷ was offered to them.

Those who were engaged in the occupation with subordinate cultivation rights were particularly known as **Kil Karanmai Udaya Kudigal**. The trained tillers, known as **Tonda Ular**²⁸, were engaged as paid servants. Like the **Tondaulavar**, the servants were hired for carrying out the different kinds of agricultural activities. For harvesting paddy there were **Arinar**²⁹. Since they used sharp sickle they were called by the name **Nelari Toluvar**³⁰. The term **Vennel Arinar**³¹ will attest the above fact. For irrigation the fields, through the sluice from the tanks, separate set of labourers were employed. To carry out the duties happily and vigorously the farmers were used to drink toddy. They were even used to sing while doing agricultural activities. Their regular and constant services enabled them to be experts in farming. The tillers when utilized the paddy preserved for sowing as food making material such people were called **Vilkudi**³².

TAXATION

To have a complete picture of the agrarian life an evaluation of the "agricultural evaluation" is indispensable so that one can obviously establish the materialistic approach of the Tamil farmers. Further, as the income from the land tax was the primary income of the state of almost at all periods, it becomes essential to have the canons of taxation and also the reactions of the agriculturists towards taxation measures. It stresses the importance to expose the tax remissions and exemptions. On the basis of economic grounds it is inevitable to know the industries associated with the agricultural products. The economic implications imbibed in agriculture warrants an analysis of the conversion of agricultural products into usable commodities. Such kinds of activities will allow the study of the involvement of professional lists and exports as a possible one.

CONCLUSION

The ancient Tamils were aware of the fact that preservation and protection of agricultural operations at different stages will promote the yield which in turn will assign prosperity. If proper care is not given to every activity in agriculture the yield will never be a prosperous one. Further to make the ploughing a prosperous one it was felt necessary to give importance to protection.

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