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ANTIQUITIES OF TERRACOTTA FIGURINES IN ANCIENT TAMIL NADU - A VIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Ancient Tamil Nadu always reflected its glory as one of greatest civilization in Indian history. Numerous excavations conducted over period of time on the land of Tamils attest the above. Antiquities collected from the excavations are the testimony of ancient Tamil people and their lifestyle. Though we acquire plentiful artifacts from the excavations, terracotta plays an important role in reconstructing the past. Terracotta literally means "baked earth", it represent ancient potteries and other fired clay objects. Terracotta commonly defines the clay objects characterized for worship, as ornaments and gamesman. The durability of terracotta figurines are usually well preserved in soil as they are made out of earthy matter. Though they are preserved well in nature mostly they are found in broken state. The color of the terracotta figurines display various shades based on the clay varieties found in a particular region. The study of these figurines helps scholars and archaeologist to understand socio-cultural phenomenon of the ancient Tamil people. Like stone and metal objects, the terracotta objects were also one of the major invention evolutions of mankind. This paper signifies the antiquities of terracotta figurines in ancient Tamil Nadu, which are found in major excavations and explorations.



KEYWORDS: Ancient Tamil Nadu , greatest civilization , socio-cultural phenomenon.

ANTIQUITY OF TAMIL NADU – AN

INTRODUCTION:

Tamil land always witnessed vestiges from the prehistoric times. The continuity of artifacts from Stone Age to historic era always catches the attention of the scholars to study more on this region. Apart from the archaeological source, ancient Tamil literatures speak volume about significant of the Tamil people. As Tamil intellectual

mentions ("kalthondri monthodri kalathey valodu munthondriya moothakudi Tamil kudi"), the lineage Tamil people are always considered to be very primitive with magnificent standard of living and knowledge.

The first discovery of Paleolithic stone tools in India at Pallavaram, Chennai by Robert Bruce Foote was one of the marvels in Indian archaeology. Soon the numerous archaeological sites in and around Tamil Nadu started to get surface, with many excavations and

explorations. Apart from the stone tools, prehistoric rock art is another significant archaeological vestige for study among scholars. These exhibit the earliest worshipping phenomenon of ancient Tamil people. The natural rocks acted as the canvas form the ancient prehistoric artist to portrait numerous scenes of their daily life. These rock art paintings display extraordinary details for understanding the scenery of prehistoric lifestyle. Apart from stone artifacts, New stone age

evolved to produce potteries. As New stone age people are more agrarian than hunters, the usage and making of potteries became more essential in their everyday life. In Tamil Nadu *New Stone Age* potteries have been discovered in the districts of Tirunelveli, Salem, Pudhukottai and Tiruchirapalli. The continuity of archaeological chronology of Tamil Nadu from prehistoric times to historic period always draw scholars and researchers to study more about this land.

Terracotta Artifacts in Tamil Nadu:

The next significant era to mention in archaeological chronology of Tamil Nadu is Megalithic period, where we find more connotations of terracotta objects in the vestiges of ancient graves. Numerous shapes of vessels signify the usage module of the ancient Tamil people. Apart from vessels, another important artifact exhibit in the excavations is the terracotta figurines. The history of terracotta figurines in India goes back to the Indus valley civilization of third millennium BCE. In Tamil Nadu during megalithic period, figurines are seen as vessel lids and knobs depicting their aesthetic senses of early natives. These figurines are mostly anthropomorphic, zoomorphic or phytomorphic in style. Even few urns exhibited female figurines on its rim portion must be illustrating the mother goddess worship. The progress of lifestyle from small settlements to cities evolved in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam period (5th century BC to 3rd century AD). The flourish of trade, industries, literatures, etc made the Sangam era an exquisite timeline in the historical chronology of Tamil Nadu. The society during Sangam period was understood from the geographical nature of the region such as Kurunji, Mullai, Marudham, Neydal, Palai. The early historical period (Sangam period) excavations conducted in Tamil Nadu has flourished abundant artifacts. One among them was terracotta figurines. Apart from its archaeological presence, numbers of references of terracotta are seen in ancient literatures. Few examples are stated below,

- **Anikurunuru** (one of the eight anthologies) – Verse 246, speaks about life size tiger terracotta figurine of was placed to keep the elephants away from millet fields.
- **Thirukural**, a classical text, which speaks about everyday virtues of an individual, mention in one of its poem (*Kural 407*)

“Nunmaan Nuzhaipulam Illaan Ezhilnam Manmaan Punaipaavai Yatru”

Translation: A handsome man without subtle and sharp intellect has the beauty of a mud-doll.

- **Silappadikaram**, one of the five great epics in Tamil literature, refers about terracotta artists. It also mentions that terracotta objects were placed for worship.
- **Manimegalai**, one of the five great epics in Tamil literature text mentions that there was custom to keep terracotta objects in the funeral ground.

Major archaeological excavations and explorations in Tamil Nadu are conducted by ASI, State department of archaeology – Tamil Nadu, Madras University and Tamil University. The findings of terracotta figurines always signify the cultural habitation nature of the site. Korkai, Boluvampatti, Tirukoilur, Modur, Andipatti, Sendamangalam, Mangudi, Alagankulam, Poompuhar, Perur, Jambai, Kodikarai, Mangudi are some of the early sites exhibiting large number of terracotta figurines in the excavations. Mother Goddess terracotta figurines are one the significant discoveries found in many archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu. Andipatti, Modur, Tirukoilur, Korkai, Boluvampatti excavations displayed Mother Goddess image. These represent the fertility cult prevailed in ancient society of Tamil Nadu. Mother Goddess terracotta figurine at Boluvampatti site near Coimbatore of Tamil Nadu is a noteworthy finding. Apart from animal and birds figurines, excavations and explorations also yielded many Buddhist terracotta figurines representing Lord Buddha (example, exploration finding of Head of Buddha in Boluvampatti site). These images are considered to be much later in age considered to Sangam period figurines.

CONCLUSION:

Though excavations yielded numerous signifying details about ancient Tamil people (such as architecture remains, pottery pieces, metal objects etc) Terracotta figurines always acted as the virtual image of the ancient people and their lifestyle. The period before sculptures evolved in Tamil land,

these terracotta figurines were only the practical images of the ancient people. Numerous physical features of human figurines such as posture, facial look, ornaments, headdress style, and headgears are some of the details, which can be studied in the terracotta figurines. The animals and birds terracotta images found in excavations usually represent the fauna of the region. The study of these figurines even helps us in even understanding the taming or domesticating nature of the faunas around them. The importance of terracotta figurines are often neglected, as they are found broken most of the time. This paper signifies the rich heritage of terracotta figurines in ancient Tamil Nadu and overall these ancient terracotta figurines study represent the mode of life led by our ancestors of Ancient Tamil Nadu.

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