



EARLY HISTORIC SETTLEMENTS OF COASTAL TAMIL NADU - GLEANED FROM SANGAM LITERATURES

S. Vetrivelvi

Assistant Archaeologist ,
ASI, Chennai Circle, Chennai .



ABSTRACT :

In archaeology, geography and statistics "Settlement" is a community in which group of people live. The density of a settlement can range from a small number of dwellings grouped together to the largest of cities with surrounding urbanized areas. Tamil Nadu coast is marked with several numbers of ancient port cities and towns. And the Sangam literature gives lot of references about the settlements. The present paper deals with the settlement patterns of coastal Tamil Nadu as gleaned from Sangam literature.

KEYWORDS : Sangam literature, Settlements, Tamil Nadu Coast, Early History.

INTRODUCTION

In archaeology, geography and statistics "Settlement" is a community in which group of people live. The thickness of a settlement can go from few residences gathered to the biggest of urban areas with encompassing urbanized regions. Settlements may incorporate villas, towns, towns and urban areas. After the development of horticulture, stays of settlements, for example, towns become increasingly normal. The study of settlement pattern in archaeology aims at reconstruction the manner in which peoples cultural activities and social institutions are distributed over the landscape (Rouse 1972)

The archaeologists reconstruct the ecological, cultural and social pattern of the ancient people through the material remains, which is discovered from the surface or under earth or water. Peoples cultural and social activities are distributed over a particular landscape, the method of analyzing these activities including cultural, social and ecological systems and their distribution is known as "settlement pattern".

The coastal line of Tamil Nadu is a part of Coromandel Coast of Bay of Bengal and Indian ocean. It is located on the south east coast of India Peninsula. Tamil Nadu coastal line is about 1,076 km long and is the second-largest coastline in the country. Entire Tamil Nadu coast is spotted with ancient port cities and towns. The Sangam literatures give an ample amount of the references about the ancient settlements

EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD

The ancient Tamil country experienced widespread human occupation from the Iron age onwards as evidenced by the distribution of burial and habitation sites categorized as 'megalithic', and characterized by Black and Red ware pottery and Iron implements. The succeeding early historic period (c. 300 BC to c. 500 AD) witnessed the appearance of an entirely new range of material cultural assemblages at a few sites, while majority of the sites retained their megalithic character (V. Selvakumar: 2008).

The term 'early historic' is defined as a chronological unit spanning from c.300 BCE to 500 CE. The early historic period is also known as "Sangam Age" in Tamil country. According to Rajan Gurukkal, the early

historic period in the Tamil country has been variously labeled a 'Sangam Age', 'megalithic' and 'Indo-Roman period' based on the respective evidence categories –the sangam literature, megaliths and Roman artefacts. However, it is being realized that these evidence categories point to the same cultural period (Gurukkal, 1989). The Megalithic burial tradition began in the Iron age continued in the early historic period too. The term "sangam" has been referred in the literatures of 9th /10th century CE. Hence, the term for Sangam age to the early historical period is not appropriate to use.

SANGAM LITERATURES

Literature is the most considerable and fruitful source of historical data and it can be divided into i. Indigenous Literature (Sangam literatures) ii. Foreigners accounts. With regard to the foreigners accounts, during the early centuries of the Christian era, the Mediterranean region countries had a brisk trade with the ancient Tamil country. Among them Romans, Greeks and Chinese have left their travel accounts.

The Tamil literatures played a vital role to know about the settlements of early historic period especially the Sangam literatures viz., eight anthologies (*Ettutogai*), the Ten Idylls (*Pattuppattu*) and the 18 minor works (*Padinenkilkanakku*) and the two epics (*Silapadikaram* and *Manimekalai*) gives a vivid picture on culture and polity of early historic period. Sangam is a Sanskrit word which means an 'association'; a "Sangam of poets", therefore, is "an association of poets". The Tamil Sangam was a body of Tamil Scholars or poets, a literary academy, which was established by the Pandyan kings; and it flourished at Madurai, on the banks of the river Vaigai and earlier at other centers (Subrahmanian N. 1996). The larger Sinnamanur plates of tenth century mentions about the "Sangam" (S.I.I. III no.206). The Tamil Sangam literature like any other is capable of exaggerating; but still it contains a large found of correctly recorded material of considerable assistance to a historian.

These Sangam literatures record the life of Tamil in the form of Poems. It talks about both internal and external life of the ancient Tamils. They lead a settled life and their life depends upon the nature. They gave more importance to the ecosystem. Based on the ecology the ancient Tamils have divided the land into five. They are;

- i. *Kurunji*
- ii. *Mullai*
- iii. *Marutham*
- iv. *Neythal*
- v. *Pallai*

Among the above mentioned landscape the present research work is deals with the " *Neythal*" – the coastal area.

Poetic Attributes of the Ancient Landscapes

| | kuṛunji | Mullai | Marudam | Neydhal | Pālai |
|------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Lovers' quarrels, wife's irritability (husband accused of visiting a courtesan) | Heroine expresses grief over separation | Elopement | Longest separation | Dangerous journey by the hero |
| Flower | kuṛunji | Mullai (Jasmine) | Marudam | Water lily | Paalai |
| Landscape | Mountains | Forest, pasture | Agricultural areas, plain | Seashore | Parched wasteland, |

| | | | | | |
|------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| | | | or valley | | Desert |
| Time | Midnight | Evening | Shortly before sunrise | Sunset | Noon |
| Season/Clim ate | Winter/Cool and moist | Late Summer/Cloud y | Late spring | Early summer | Summer |
| Animal | Monkey, elephant, horse, bul l, Tiger | Deer | Water Buffalo, freshwater fish | Crocodile, shark | Fatigued elephant, tiger, or wolf |
| Crop/Plant | Jackfruit, bamboo, <i>venkai</i> | Konrai | Mango | Punnai | Cactus |
| Water | Waterfall | Rivers | Pond | Well, sea | dry wells, stagnant water |
| Soil | Red and black soils with stones and pebbles | Red soil | Alluvial | Sandy, saline soil | salt affected soil |
| Occupation | hunting, gathering honey | animal husbandry, shifting cultivation | agriculture | fishing, coastal trade, salt manufacturing | traveling, marauding |
| God | Seyyon | Maayon | Senon | Kadalon | Korravai |

Source: Wikipedia

In sangam written works the antiquated settlements were referred as "thinai". Based on the geographical settings the land forms were divided as *kuruji thinai*, *mullai thinai*, *maurtha thinai*, *neythal thinai* and *pallai thinai*. The ancient sangam literature Tholkapiyam refers;

"thinaiثورம் மாரியை தினா இலாயே" (Thol:966)

Later the term *"thinai"* also used to refer the particular group people of people i.e. *kulam* *"Vann thinai Puraiyor"* (Kuru); *"Ethinai pirathal"*

LIFE OF NEYTHAL PEOPLE:

Tholkapiyar mentions the neythal land as *"varunan meya perumanal ulagam"* which means the land is full of white sand and the people settlements were stretched over that land and their life was based on the fishing, hence the nets and boats drawn up on the beach. In sangam literature, plenty of references are available for *neythal thinai*. In *narrinai* 102 poems, *kurunthogai* 71 poems, *aiyankurunuru* 100 poems (one among the five parts), *kalithogai* 33 poems, *agananuru* 40 poems totally 346 poems are discussed about the *neythal thinai*.

The male inhabitants were known as *parathavar*, *nulaiyar*, *thimilar*, *nulaiyal*, *serppan*, and *umanar*. The female inhabitants were known as *"nulachiyar"*, *"nulathiyar"* and *"parathiyar"* The headmen were known as *thalaimagan*, *konkan*, *thuravan*, *serppan*, *mellam*, and *pulamban*. Their occupations included fishing coastal trade, pearl hunting and salt manufacturing. The *parathavars* were sailors and fishermen, the *nulaiyar* were the drivers and *umanars* the salt manufactures and merchants.

INHABITANTS:

As mentioned above, there are lot references about the *neythal* inhabitants in Sangam literatures. *Maduraikanchi* describes about the physical features of *parathavar* as they had masculine body and board shoulders. The *neydhal* people are very courageous and faced the troubles without any fear. It also mentions that they are all well versed in sea fearing activities.

Padallai kanni parrerruthal thinithol
Mudala yakkai muluvalli makkal (madhu.60-61)

The sangam literature mentions that the *parathavar* are very active in maritime activities and they are all well trained in the same. They had a royal inheritance and entitled as “*Athiaarasar*”. For instance, the sangam literature *Agananuru* mentions about *Mandhi* a person chief of the *parathavars* in the Chola territory. He was head of the place where the river Kaveri confluence into Sea. The *Agananuru* poem as follows;

Valvil erumthalathoda parathavar komaan
Palvel mathi kalaar munthruai (agam.26;7-8)

In Sangam literature, the reference about the *Parathavar* are found in *Narrinai* – 17 places; *kurunthogai* – 3 places; *Aingurunuru* – 2 places; *Agananuru* – 11 places. The references about the *nulaiyar*, *thimilar*, *thimilon* are very less in Sangam literatures.

As mentioned earlier the female inhabitants are known as *nulathiyar*, *parathiyar*, *nulachiyar*. The direct references are not available in the Sangam literatures. However, in *sirupanarrupadai* it is mentioned as “*nulaimagal*” (*siru:158*).

COASTAL (NEYTHAL) SETTLEMENTS

From the time of Pre-history, shelter is being one of the utmost needs of the human being. During pre-historic times man lived in the rock-shelters and later he settled near the river banks. Then he led a settled life, as a result man becomes civilized and a river bank becomes the cradle for birth civilization. As per the Gordon Childe’s theory one of the important criteria for civilization is settlements. In Tamil Nadu large number of early historic settlements has been discovered.

In Sangam literature we have lot of reference about the settlements. The settlements are referred as *agam*, *ill*, *illam*, *uraiyul*, *uraividam*, *kallalai*, *kuzhal*, *kurambai*, *kurumbu*, *nedunagar*, *pugil*, *manai*, *maadam*. These settlements were fashioned based on the ecology, wealth, occupation etc.,. The ancient settlements identified near the seashore are known as *seri*, *sirukudi*, *pakkam*, *pattinam*, and *serur*. They lived in small huts as follows;

“Kurrirai kurambaik kolaivem parthavar” (Agam.210;1)

The people belongs to same ethnicity lives in one place is known as “*seri*”. Sangam literatures also mentions about “*kudi*”, where the people lives in a group. The Sangam literatures referred as follows;

Kāṇalaṭi ciṛukuṭi (Nar.4;1)
Pulavunarru ciṛukuṭi (Nar.338;8)
ciṛukuṭi parathavar (Agam140;1)

The Sangam literatures describe the coastal settlements as “the peoples lived on the sand dunes, surrounded by the palm trees and the settlements always have the smell of meat and fish. The *Parathavar*

were lived in one place for a longer time that settlements were known as **Muthur, "Ambal Muthur" (249;10); Aliya marabinnam muthur (Nar.31;5); Semmal Muthur (Nar.130;4)**

The Sangam poet Ullochchanar describes about the houses of Parathavar. The houses were built out of grasses and palm leaves. The materials used for fishing were placed out the houses. The houses were made out of perishable materials further it will withstand during storm and heavy rain.

DISCUSSION

Based on the literary sources, the early historic settlements were identified all along the Tamil Nadu coast. The archaeological excavations have been conducted at various sites. The parameters for settlements/urbanization are reconstructed from the evidence scattered in a number of sites, both inland and coastal which contain architectural features like brick structures, ring wells, pits with drains, dyeing vats, storage jars, kiln and hearth. The limitation of interpretation about these archeological discoveries by corroborating with the literary sources is the lack of systemic archaeological investigations i.e. horizontal excavation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arunraj. T. 2015 "Role of Satellite Sites for The Growth of Arikamedu As Indo- Roman Trading Station", Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi
- Bishnupriya Basak 2016 "Early Historic Urbanization in South India: A Revaluation", "Pratnatattva"; Journal of the Dept. of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University, Vol.22; Pg.29-40
- Champakalakshmi, R. 1996 "Trade, Ideology and Urbanization, South India 300 BC – AD 1300. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Childe, Gordon V. 1950. The Urban Revolution. Town Planning Review 21: 3-17.
1942. Social Evolution, London, P.18 and P.47.
- Dhavalikar, M.K., 1985 "Early Settlement and Subsistence patterns in the Deccan", in *Recent Advances in Indo Pacific Prehistory*, V.N. Mishra, and Peter Bellwood (eds.), IBH and Oxford Publications, Delhi, pp.381-389.
- Gurukkal, Rajan, 1989 "Forms of Production and Forces of Change in Ancient Tamil Society", *Studies in History*, 5 (2):159-175.
- Ramanathan. K. 2012 "*Neythal thinai makkalin panpattu kuttamappu*" unpublished Ph.d. Thesis submitted to the Senthamil College, Madurai.
- Rajan, K., Yathees Kumar V.P., and Selvakumar S., 2009 *Catalogue of Archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu*, vol.I&II, Heritage India Trust, Thanjavur.
- Selvakumar. V and S. Darsana 2008. Genesis and Development of Urban process in the Ancient/ Early Historic Tamil country in (G. Sengupta and S. Chakraborty eds.) *Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia*, pp.337-372.
- Shanmugam, P. 1997 Early Historic Settlements in Tamilnadu. Presidential address delivered at the 58th session of Indian History Congress. Section V. Historical Archaeology, Epigraphy Numismatics and Archives. November 1997, Bangalore.
- Subrahmanian N. 1996 "Sangam Polity" published by Ennes Publications, Udumalpet