

The Origin of the Communities in Kongu Nadu: A Study from the Sangam Age to Present

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Abstract

This article is a historical study of seven Saivaite temples in Kongu Nadu which played a major role in the religious, political, social, and economic life of the people. The land of Kongu consists of various communities and castes. The people of the Kongu region had contacts with the foreign people for developing their business. The analysis of the castes and communities, coins and taxes along with the study of the inscriptions from the seven Saivaite temples of this region reveals the life story of the people. Further, it helps to study customs, habits and practices of the people. The records from the seven Saivaite temples mention the different communities like Devaradiyars, Kaikolars, Puluvas, Vellalas, Vettuvas, Brahmanas, and Siva Brahmanas. The people who were called the Vettuvas were the tribal people. Later on, they became a large group and dominated the Kongu region. The Sangam literature presents that the Vettuvas emerged from the pre-historic time itself. Scholars have suggested that the proto-Austroloid, Negroid and Naga stock might have been their ancestors. Their descendants were later known by various names such as Vettuvar, Irular, and Villiar. The Vettuva chiefs like Kadiyanedu Vettuvan of Kodiamalai and Kantira Kopperunalli were eulogized by a poet in Purananuru for their heroic deeds.

Keywords: Community, Caste, Kongu, Vettuvar, and Religion

Introduction

The copper plate of *Sivamara* (a 9th century A.D. Ganga King) from *Perunkatai* and *Hirahadagalli* provides the information about *Krathas*. They were called as Kongu Vettuvar. The Vettuvars are mentioned as robbers in Sundarar's *Tevaram*. The Vettuvars were living their life by hunting the animals and some people organized a group and robbed the people to meet their basic needs. The Chola king Aditya I made his soldiders to find the robbers and subdued them and because of his influence and encouragement a large number of Vellalas settled in the Kongu region and that provided a platform for the conflict between Vettuvas and Vellalars. These two groups produced the majority of the population in the Kongu region. The Vettuvars excelled in agricultural activities. They were affected by the new ideas and technology introduced by the Vellalars. The Vettuvars were left helplessly in the Kongu region because of the new invention. The Vettuvar community had some social dignity and private property. Agriculture was not only their major work, but also, they worked as the royal agents and they

sponsored the temples. Then they came forward to assimilate the habits of the people like the Brahmins and the Vellalars. Later, there was a gradual understanding, compromise. Mutual exchange of traditions and customs took place between the Vellalars and the Vettuvvars. The Vettuvvars had changed their mode of life from an unstable nomadic life to that of a stable and settled life as agriculturists.

The inscriptions, which were found in the Kongu region, mentioned the Vettuvvars as *Kaduvetti* because they had converted the forests into arable lands. The majority of the villages in the North Kongu Nadu became inhabited by the Vettuvvar people in the 12th and the 13th century A.D. They were the natives of the Kongu Nadu and they had affixed the prefix to the Kongu region with their group name. The *Puluva*, *Mayala*, and *Kavala* are the sub-divisions of the Vettuvvars. They were treated equal in the royal personages and they held high posts. The Vellalars had been portrayed in majority of the medieval inscriptions. They are mentioned to in the sense of community (or) as landholders. It is mentioned in the Chola inscriptions the Nattars or Nattavars were the landholders. As landholders they became economically independent during the Chola period and this gave a way to the differentiation between Vellala and Brahmana community. The inscriptions propose that they too administered the *Nadu* and the *Ur* sometimes. The inscriptions of the Kongu country reveal that the Vellalar names came after the *Nadu*, *Ur*, *Kulam* (family name). It came from the family names mentioned in the inscriptions of the Kongu country especially from the seven Saivaite centers. Further, it is mentioned that the families were divided *Kadai Kulam*, *Padari kulam*, *Mappulli Kulam*, and *Kannan Kulam*.

The inscriptions of the temple of Avinasi, Tirumuruganpundi and Tiruchchengodu mention the Vellala community and also it is mentioned that they involved in making liberal grants to the temples. These families are mentioned as *Padari Kulam*, *Mappullai Kulam*, *Kannan Kulam* and *Kadai Kulam*. The Kongu Vellalar (the Kadai Kulam) is presented either by the later names or by the name of deities, for example, Vellalan Kadargalel Nakkan Araiyan Sundara Devan and Vellalan Sattandagalil Sิริyan Devan. Some critics have presented the *Kadai*, the *Satandai* and *Kannan* as family names, which are mentioned in the later inscriptions as *Kulam* and *Kuttam*.

The earlier references to the family names among the Vellala community are known as *Padari*. A *Padari* of the Vellalar community is portrayed as the donor in the inscriptions of Avinasi dated 1262 A.D, making a gift of 10 panams for maintaining the *sandhi lamp* to the deity Avinasiyaludaiya Nayanar. The donor is referred to by name Nallisaiyalan Parakkiraman of Palatoluva in Kuruppa Nadu. Another inscription from the same place dated 1562 A.D. reveals the truth that the gift of 10 panam for maintaining a sandhi lamp to the deity Avinasiyaludaiya Nayanar by Palattolu Vellalar Padari Kulam, Nallisaiyalan Narakkiraman of Kuruppa Nadu.

The former record had not referred to the group among the Vellalar, while the later inscriptions mentioned specifically the name of the Vellalar group called Palattolu. The name Palattolu seems to refer to the place named after cattle shed or milk shed which was included in Kuruppa Nadu. Another family known as *Mappullai* belongs to the Vellalar community. This

family was represented by Danapalan as evidenced by the record from Tirumuruganpundi dated in the 11th and (1265 A.D.) and 12th (1266 A.D.) years of the Kongu Chola king Vikrama Chola. They refer to the donation of 10 *achchu* for the supply of food offerings to Tirumuruganpundialudaiyar.

This family hailed from Pallavidam (Palladam) included in Vayaraikkal Nadu. The Siva Brahmanas who had *kani* rights in the temple undertook to supply rice for the food offerings in the temple. *Kannan* is another family name that belongs to the Vellalar group. The member of this group hailed from Morur in Kilkarai Pundurai Nadu. The individual who belonged to the Kannan family called Tirumalaiyattappa Nalla Thambi Kangeyan is mentioned as the donor who constructed the pillars called sitakaragandankal close to the nritta mandapa of the Periyandavar shrine. This is referred to in the records from Tiruchchengodu dated 1599 A.D. The structural additions made to the Ardhanariswarar shrine at Tiruchchengodu is testimony of the exquisite workmanship of the dancing mandapa. It may be suggested from the name Sittakaragandan that the pillar was named after one of the kings of the late Vijayanagar period.

Karl is another family name from the Vellalar community that is mentioned in the record from Avinasi dated 1273 A.D., in the reigning period of Maravarman Kulasekara I. This Vellalan Kari by name Sattiaianayakkan of Arangur in Kilkarai Pundurai Nadu is said to have made a gift of *one achchu* for burning a *sandhi* lamp to the deity Avinasialudaiyar. From the availability of the inscriptions of the above king from Avinasi, it may be suggested that Kulasekara brought Kongu region under control around 1273 A.D. From an inscription of the Kongu Pandya king Rajakesarivarman Vira Pandya dated in 9th regional year (1274 A.D.) from Avinasi, it is stated that a settlement was reached by the members of the Vellalar *community* and members of *Puluva community* belonging to Vadaparisara Nadu. The settlements relate to the removal of two *Vellalar* and two *Puluva* families from the village, without assigning any reason for this action. From among the signatories hailing from different village mention may be made of Vellalan Mukkanandan from Nambiperur, Vellalan Kongu Koppillan and Vellalan Chokkan from Turavalur. The excommunicated four families were again accepted within a month which is attested by another record.

An interesting document now available in a palm leaf form preserved at the Museum of Kalaimagal School of Erode talks about the sale deed of some villages by Vira Vikkirma Soliyandak Gounder to other three individuals namely, Poynkak Gounder of Panagadai clan of Elumathur, Sellappakgounder of Andai clan from Maruthurai and Saravana Gounder of the same clan from Korranur.

When the Madurai region was ruled by Chokkalinga Nayakar (1710 to 1730 A.D.), the Kongu region comprising of Tirumuruganpundi, Avinasi and Mangalam was governed by Vira Vikkirma Soliyandak Gounder, a Vellala, as an agent. He had to pay 24,000 *panam* of gold as a tribute to Madurai king which was a long due. There was a crisis when the king strictly ordered to pay this amount within three days or he would be sentenced. During this period of emergency the above said three Gounders came to his rescue and paid 5000 Pon each and settled the tax due.

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As an act of gratitude, the agent Vira Vikkrama Soliyandak Gounder sold the devasthanas of Tirumuruganpundi, Avinasi and the village of Tirumuruganpundi to the above said three Vellavas.

In this record, the chief Vira Vikkrama Soliyandak Gounder declared himself as Chitirameli Thalaivar. It is interesting to note that the agricultural body 'Chitirameli Periya Nadu' emerged as a winning force during 11-13th century A.D. in the northern and western districts of Tamil Nadu. K.V. Subrahmanya Aiyer describes the body as a large provincial organisation. This body played a crucial role in the social history of Kongu Nadu. This tradition was followed up to the 18th century A.D. and is attested by this record.

It is generally known from the early and medieval inscriptions of the Kongu region that the Brahmanas held the highest position and were the land owners or Kaniyalar. In the absence of any specific mention of the lands granted to Brahmanas as Aagaraparru or Kaniyalar, who controlled the lands or the involvement of the Brahmanas in the activities of the *Sabhai*, it may be construed that the Brahmanas were relegated to the background and therefore forbidden to enjoy the temple lands.

Brahmanas happened to be either recipients of the grants or those who enjoyed the grant made by others and the nine inscriptions from Tiruchchengodu temple refer to the provision made for the feeding of the Brahmanas on several occasions. Inscriptions of Parantaka (dated 916 A.D.) and Raja Raja I (dated 995 A.D.) mention the provision made to meet the feeding expenses of the Brahmanas. According to many records the women donors had come forward to deposit gold in order to feed the Brahmanas daily and on special occasions. The *Ganaperumakkal* represented the executive body, *Alunganam* which was constituted to supervise the activities of the festivals in the temples conducted on specific occasions like the day of the Nakshatra or Tidhi by feeding the Brahmanas.

The endowments made were deposited by the *Ganaperumakkal* and they also enjoyed the interest that accrued with it. The earliest mention of such an endowment is found mentioned in the record of Parantaka I dated in his 9th year (916 A.D.). An endowment of 20 *kalanju* of gold was deposited for feeding the Brahmanas on the day of Tiruvonam, with the *Tirvona Ganaperumakkal* at Tiruchchengodu by Arattan Nakkan's son on behalf of Manikantii Odaiyamandal who hails from Erode. The name ending with Nakkan suggests her association with *Devaradiyars* group. She belongs to the category of temple women whose contribution to the temple of the Brahmanas is known from several records.

A record of the 12th year of the same king refers to the endowments made by Ranamukka Naranan for feeding the Brahmanas in the temple on the day of his natal star Rohini in the month of Masi. This occasion had been chosen by the donor in order to acquire merit (Punya) by feeding the Brahmanas. Another inscription was found on the same date, which records a gift of 26 *kalanju* of gold by Uttaman Ganavadi, a member of the assembly known as *Sonattu*

Perumakkal at Tiruchchengodu, for feeding the Brahmanas in the festival days in the month of Masi. It represents the members of the Perunguri Mahasabhai, which normally meets in the temple premises to take decisions on various matters including the celebration of festivities and the welfare measures to the Brahmanas.

In the 26th year of Parantaka I (933 A.D.), Kadanpudi Manikkan in the name of his daughter, Mundonkon made an endowment of 5 *kalanju* of gold with the *Tiruvadirai Ganaperumakkal* to provide food for the Brahmanas on the day of *Tiruvadirai*. The name of the donor Kadanpudi Manikkan reminds of the chief of the *Pudi* family. An interesting record dated in the 13th year of Raja Raja I (998 A.D.) from Tiruchchengodu records an endowment of 20 *kalanju* of gold by Kasettungal, left in charge of *Pannirandu Nattu Perumakkal* of Tiruchchengodu by Kamakkanar, wife of Ilangonadigal for feeding 20 Brahmanas on the days of Ekadasi.

The gift was to be administered by *Tiruvekadasi Gana Perumakkal* who also happened to be the part of the assembly. Another record in the 16th year (1001 A.D.) mentions the gift made for feeding of Brahmanas on the occasion of the Svadi nakstra in the month of Purattasi. The Brahmanas were held responsible for maintaining the grant.

A record of Kongu Chola king, Vira Rajendra dated in his 17th regnal year (1223-24 A.D.) from Avinasi registers the provision of 100 *achchu* for the food offerings to the deity Avinasiyaludaiyar by a person from among the Pillais. A Brahmana named Sivallan is referred to as the protector of the grant. It may be concluded that the Brahmanas enjoyed the gift made by chiefs and individuals. The Brahmanas had been taken care of by regulating the grants made by the individuals through the assembly or *Gana Perumakkal*. The involvement of the assembly shows the interest taken by them to protect the Brahmanas and their status. Therefore the relation between the higher groups and the Brahmana community was maintained with utmost care.

Siva Brahmanas are referred to in the inscriptions of Avinasi, Tirumuruganpundi, Karur, Venjamankudalur, etc. These Siva Brahmanas enjoyed special privileges in the temples of Kongu country. They are described as the one who had *kani* rights in the different temples like Tirumuruganpundi Mahadevar, Avinasiyaludaiyar and Tiruanilaialudaiyar, Venjamankudal etc³⁶. The term Kaniyalar refers to the people who had hereditary rights that they enjoyed with the reference to the privileges in the temples and by their heirs.

The earliest reference to the mention of Siva Brahmanas on whom the special privileges were conferred is recorded in the inscriptions of Parakesari Abhimana Cholan from Tirumuruganpundi dated his 12th year (1100 A.D.). The Siva Brahmana named Kasyapan Venkadan Bhavadasan Narayanan alias Abhimana Solabhattan had the kani rights of the temple of Tirumuruganpundi Mahadevar. A record from Avinasi dated in the 4th year Vira Chola Deva (1186 A.D. - 1187 A.D.) mentions the gift of tax amount as entrusted to the Siva Brahmana for the services like Tirumerpucchu to the deity Avinasiyandar. Another record from Karur mentions

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that the Siva Brahmanas resided along with the other professional groups in the Tirumadaivalagam at the temple of Tiruanilaludaiyar at Karuvur, for whom the village was granted as Jivana Seshasa (life maintenance).

A record from Avinasi dated in the 15th year (1221 A.D. - 1222 A.D.) of Rajakesari Varman alias Vira Rajendra states that an undertaking was given by Sikaliyan of Kasyapa Gotra, a Siva Brahman who had a right in the temple to maintain 32 *sandhi lamps* with the oil endowed during his grandfather's time. Apart from this he also had *ten kalanju of gold* for Pattai Podi Choru, five ulakk-u of rice measured by Parakesari per day, one Kariyamudu, Ulakku Tayirramudu, etc.

The Siva Brahmanas in the temple at Venjamankudaliar in Venjamanadu, Virasolamandalam undertook to maintain a *sandhi lamp* before the deity, for which gold was donated by Marupararnappallavaraiyan, a Karadi Vettuvar. It is learnt from the record from Tirumuruganpundi dated during the 44th year of Vira Rajendra (1250 A.D.) that Siva Brahmanas named Avinasi Kalyan, Avinasi Sattarai Kappan and their sons Avinasi and Avinasi Murugan figured as donors of 24 anai achchu, sriyakki palanjalaagai *achchu* for maintaining the two perpetual lamps before *Lord* Tirumuruganpundi Nayanar, These Siva Brahmanas belong to Kasyapa Gotra".

There is a similar instance in the 11th year record of this scheme from the same place. The Siva Brahmanas who had *kani* rights in the temple of Tirumuruganpundi Aludaiyar received a gift of 10 achchu from Solan Pariyan alias Danapalan belonging to Vellalan Mappuli of Pallavidam in Vayaraikal Nadu and undertook to supply rice daily, to meet the food offerings". Another Siva Brahmana mentioned in a records was Sattarai Kappan Tiruvegimbam Udaiyan who have received the money and agreed to carry out the endowment. In the record of Vikrama Chola dated in his 12th regnal year (1266 A.D.) from Tirumuruganpundi there is a mention of the receipt of the gift for offering the sandal paste to the deity. Interestingly Sivan Pillai Nayan alias Ponnambalanambi and Ponna Pugali Vendan of the temple of Tirumuniganpundialudaiyar had hereditary kani rights. Eventually they lost their kani rights and king Konerimaikondan issued an order restoring the rights to the two Siva Brahmanas and granted 15 *achchu*. A record from Karuvur dated in the 3rd year of the king Konerimaikondan registers the conferment of certain, privileges on temple officials namely the Siva Brahmanas, who had *kani* ights in the temples and other professionals.

A royal order was also issued ranting 40 *achchu* to the deity of the temple at Karuvur⁴⁶. Thus the Siva Brahmanas had enjoyed the *kani* rights granted by the Kongu Cholas and were allowed to enjoy the same without any interruptions. Like the Brahmanas the Siva Brahmanas attached to the temple had their own say in the activity of the temple. The use of the term *kani* or *kani* rights became more frequent from the 11th century onwards. The Siva Brahmanas have been considered along with the other professional group, with the respect to the enjoyment of rights like Jivittakarar who were the holders of land given by royal authority for their sustenance. Like *Kaniyatchi* granted to the Brahmanas by the Cholas the *kani* rights have been conferred by

the Kongu rulers on the Siva Brahmanas.

Kaikkolas were generally considered as weavers. Members of the weaver community served in the army of Terinjakaikolar. Their activities in the capacity of army men were more during the period of the medieval Cholas and during the Kongu Chola period. Apart from the royal family officers of high rank in the Kaikkolar army they also took initiative and were associated in temple functions". The Saliyars and the Kaikkolas are the two weaving communities who were normally engaged in the production of silk and cotton clothes for the purpose of inland and overseas trade. In the 12th and 13th century A.D., the Kaikkolas were referred making - nations in the form of cash to the temples which enhanced the economic status.

Conclusion

The Vettuvars' activity ultimately lifted their social status and mobility through the magnificent gifts to the temples. In the 12th and 13th century A.D. there was an innovation in the social organization, particularly, in the Kongu country, which enabled them to make endowments, besides their professional activities. There were two divisions called right hand and left hand (*Valangai* and *Idangai*). These are recorded in the inscriptions from 12th and 13th centuries A.D. In the late 14th and 15th centuries A.D. one can find the assignment of right hand status to Saliyars and left hand status to Kaikkolas, which indicates not only their official status but also their occupation. But the Kaikkolas' ambitions were far and wide not only for their social privileges but also for their ritual and religious status". In that way their role in the temple at Tirumuruganpundi and Karur can be justified through the privileges in the ritualistic process. The weaver community acquired the position of social and economic importance and this is confirmed by reference to their involvement not only in the textile production and marketing but also in temple services, gift making process and in the administration and so on. With the increase of commerce and itinerancy, the demand for textile and cotton products increased and thereby they obtained special privileges. It is on account of this they tried to protect the temple besides being the head among the craftsman as seen in inscriptions in the Kongu region in Tirumuruganpundi, Karur etc.

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