



HISTORY OF THE EARLY TAMILS – AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

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Archaeology became an important subject, increasingly realized by the European and Indian Scholars in the 20th Century. It received greater attention after the foundation of the Asiatic society of Bengal in 1784. The archaeological exploration at Pallavaram near Madras had increased the knowledge of the archaeologist on the stone age culture. They explored further to prove the stone age settlement in and around Madras. Number of other scientific excavations conducted in Tamil Nadu by the archaeologist brought to light the gradual growth of early historic culture from the stone age culture

INTRODUCTION

The importance of Indian Archaeology is increasingly realized by the historians for understanding the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the people in the past. The material remains that ancient people left behind them are regarded as a treasure once. Now these remains were regarded as the source of information for the reconstruction of the past. It was developed as a scientific discipline during the 20th century. In India, it received greater attention after the coming of the British and the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, was a beginning in this direction.

PALAEOLITHIC SITES

Archaeology in Tamil Nadu is comparatively young and the discovery of Paleolithic Hand Axe at Pallavaram near Chennai was a beginning. Robert Bruce Foote, surveyed the northern parts of Tamil Nadu, particularly on the banks of river Palar and Kortalayar and discovered a number of stone tools at Athirampakkam and Gudiyam. Later V.D. Krishnasami, Sankalia and Paterson explored these areas and brought to light a number of stone tools indicating the habitat of man. V.D. Banerjee of the Archaeological Survey of India surveyed the Chengalpattu region between 1962-64 and said that the stone tools found at Gudiyam were of Achulian type and its antiquity can be dated back to two lakh years. In addition to these places, Neyveli, Poondi and Vadamadurai situated very close to Madras yielded a number of Old Stone Age tools. Since all these places are situated in and around Madras, this cultural center was called as the “Madras Hand Axe” industry. The tools manufactured here included Hand Axes, Choppers, Pebbles, Blades, Scrappers, Points, Flakes and Discoid. The Hand Axes found at Attirampakkam in the Chengalpattu District is similar to the one found of Africa.

MESOLITHIC IMPLEMENTS

The next phase in its development was the Mesolithic age, indicating a distinct cultural stage, called microlithic. It is found at Tiruttangal and T. Kallupatti in the Virudhunagar and Madurai Districts respectively. Though small, the microlithic implements were well sharpened, refined and polished. Man during this stage was still a hunter; however, their habitations were more permanent than before.

NEOLITHIC TOOLS

The Neolithic people made revolutionary change in course of their evolution. The Neolithic people seem to have realized the importance of pottery and in course of time they improved the technique of pottery making. The polished and fine grained stone tools indicate the improved condition towards development. They began to clear the forest and cultivate the lands by using sharpened stone axes and hammers. Robert Bruce Foote collected over a thousand specimens of Neoliths, including 78 distinct artifacts of which 41 belonged to the polished variety and the remaining 37 were unpolished. Coloured pottery and coloured stones were also found in the list of this collection.

The excavations at Paiyampalli in the North Arcot District revealed the existence of Hand Axes and wheel made potteries. The presence of postholes indicates the practice of pit dwelling leading one to assume that the Neolithic people established their settlements. Similar cultural remains were found at Mullikadu, Tailamalai, and Togarapalli in the Dharmapur District. On the basis of C-14 method these cultural remains were dated between 2000 BC and 600 BC.

The Neolithic Age is succeeded in Tamil Nadu by the Iron Age as in the case of many other western countries. Bronze or Copper Age was not prominently found in Tamil Nadu except a lonely site at T. Kallupatti in Madurai District. This is probably due to the fact that the art of making alloys

was learnt only during the later stage of the Iron Age as a result of contact with bronze and copper culture. The Iron Age culture widened very quickly throughout Tamil Nadu.

IRON AGE

The Iron Age Culture in the Tamil Country is found in association with Megalithic culture. Excavations and exploitations have been conducted in a number of places in Tamil Nadu even before the turn of this century. It revealed the earliest culture as being the Iron Age Culture. The bottom most layers in the excavated trenches contain only the Iron Age cultural traits such as Iron objects. Black and Red Ware, Glass beads, Ban Glass and metal Bangles. The beginning of the Iron Age in Tamil Nadu is at present dated roughly to 500 BC. Long Knife, Iron Axe, Arrows, Long neck pots, Jars and conical type potteries were discovered in 1916 by Richard and T.N. Hearsy at Odugattur in the Vellore Taluk of Noreth Arcot District.

The material remains discovered by C.L. Suri and Narayanababu of Archaeological Survey of India in 1982-83 at Kambarmedu in the Sirkali Taluk of Tanjore District include Black and Red Ware bowls, Red Painted bowls, Handmade potteries, wheel made potteries, precious stones, copper beads and Rings, Glass Bangles and Copper Coins. Another important megalithic site is Perumpair in the Madurantakam Taluk of Chengalpattu District. It was discovered in 1908 by Alexander Rea. The findings here indicate the cultural continuity from the Neolithic Age to Iron Age. The presence of Neolithic Hand Axe in the Iron Age stratum clearly indicates this continuity. Besides these, the discovery of the human skeleton in its meditation posture throws light on the different funeral practice of the people. The presence of Iron in the Megalithic burials indicates that it was attached so much in their daily life.

The Iron Age sites spreading the entire Tamil Nadu speaks much about the use of the variety of artifacts towards the development. Odugattur in the North Arcot District, Kodumanal in the Erode District, Kambarmedu in the Tanjore District. Perumpair in the Chengalpattu District, Mallappadi in the Dharmapuri District, Kovalanpottal and Anuppanadi in the Madurai District, Sittannaval in the Pudukkottai District, Adichchanallur in the Tirunelveli District are a few to mention. Most of the above sites are situated in plains. A good number of Iron artifacts found almost in all the sites. These objects would have been things to the transformation of society to better condition. With the help of Iron, Agricultural activities were done by clearing the forest. Hunting and fishing became the occupation of the people to supplement their foods. The innumerable Iron weapons such as the lance, Spearheads, Swords and Arrows speak that they were necessitated to protect themselves from any external danger. A constant threat was there to the life and condition of the people.

The inhabitants of South India used iron for the first time round about 1200 BC. During this period, the iron industry reached a high water mark, a fact which indicates a good development in metallurgy in South India. Iron flakes are found in many Megalithic sites in the Madurai region. In this connection, it is inferred that these people attained a high degree of skill and knowledge about smelting, casting and carving in the Megalithic Age.

HISTORICAL SITES

The historic period in the Tamil Country began from the beginning of the 3rd century BC. It is attested by a number of

Tamil-Brahmi scripts, particularly found in the southern most part of Tamil Nadu. These scripts are seen in association with the Jain Caves in the case of South Tamil Nadu and in the case of North Tamil Nadu it is found in association with other excavated material remains. These sites are excavated either by individuals or by institutions and brought to light a number of artifacts. Semi Precious beads, Bangles, Conch Shells, Glass and Copper objects, Terracotta figurines were unearthed at Adiyamankottai in the Dharmapuri District by the Department of Archeology, University of Madras in 1981-82. The excavation throws light on the traces of human habitation from the 1st century BC.

Arikamedu was a famous trade centre on the Coromandel Coast of Tamil Nadu. It is very close to Pondicherry. Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1945 and Vimala Bekely in 1989-92 conducted a scientific excavation. It brought to light, two colour dyeing vats. It was a popular weaving center flourished during the first centuries of the Christian era. The existence of an active bead industry is attested by the different kinds of beads found here. Beads made up of Precious stones, Gold, Shell and Sapphires were found here. Similarly rings made out of different metals are also seen. Weighing Stones, Terracotta figures, Ivory objects were also available. The presence of Ambrorae Jars and Arretine Potteries speak of the Roman Connection with Tamil Nadu. As much as 64 potsherds with Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions are found in the excavation.

An early historic site at Alagarai in the Trichy District has all the material remains found at Arikamedu. Shells bangles, Glass bangles and Semi precious beads were some of the objects manufactured here both to meet the local need as well as for foreign export. Potteries bearing Tamil-Brahmi script were also found here. Weighing stones invariably found in these places demonstrate the practice of weights and measures in the day-to-day commercial transaction. Another important port center in the same district is Uraiyur. It was a busy commercial centre in Tamil Nadu. Agriculture and weaving were the main profession of the people as the later is understood by the discovery of spindle whorl. Pottery making, bead designing, precious stone cutting were other professions of the people. Indoor games like chess was the most popular game among them. Another significant find at Uraiyur is the smoking pipe. Almost 20 potsherds bearing the Tamil-Brahmi scripts demonstrate widespread knowledge of writing in the early historic period.

Thousands of gold coins found at Karur, the capital of the Cheras. Goldsmithery seems to be well flourished profession and goldsmiths were popular in the Cheran region. Rings made up of gold and silver was the significant finding of the place. The active trade between Rome and Tamil Nadu is attested by the presence of numerous gold coins. Tamil-Brahmi scripts are also found here. Alagankulam in the Ramnad District is another important coastal town during the earlier historic period. The houses of people were constructed by concrete. There is an evidence to the effect that there existed horse is known from a horse mould. Amboare jars, Rowlett ware potteries, and Northern Black polished wares were available. Shell objects, golden beads and semi-precious stone were also found here. As in the case of other excavated sites, Tamil-Brahmi script is also seen here.

CONCLUSION

The excavations and explorations so far conducted brought to light the economic and cultural conditions of the people in Tamilnadu. From the above account it is understood

that the Paleolithic man lived particularly in the northern part of the Tamil country as a wanderer. However, there is an indication that microlithic people largely lived in the southern part of Tamilnadu during the Mesolithic period. On the basis of the material remains available that the Neolithic people were instrumental in bringing a change towards the civilized condition. Following the New Stone Age, the people during the Iron Age laid foundation for all round development. Almost all the excavated sites yielded potteries with Tamil-Brahmi scripts. This speaks of the knowledge of writing even before the Asokan scripts found in the Tamil Country. The accounts found in the Sangam literatures are well attested by the material remains that were discovered from the excavations at Arikamedu, Alagankulam, Uraiyur, Kaveripatnam and Kanchipuram.

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