

Veneration of Cattles during Sangam Period of Tamil Nadu

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Tamils regarded agriculture as a noble and dignified profession because they were aware that a plentiful harvest and high agricultural productivity would prevent starvation in the state, The Tamils were aware that excessive rain would reduce labour requirements for the plough and stop producing a harvest. The fact that those who live by agriculture and all the others will lead a cringing and dependent life too will expose the importance and the prominence attached to agricultural activities and services.

Cattle raising and dairy farming were closely related to agriculture. The writings make it abundantly obvious that the cow and ox were objects of great devotion. The principal domesticated animals were cows, goats, and sheep, which were raised for agricultural use. Naturally, cattle were regarded as the standard of property as well as being holy. The number of cow heads one owned was used to determine one's prosperity and the wealth of the community. Since it was clearly understood how important livestock was as a source of wealth, breeding bulls were raised to increase the stock of cattle.

Breeding bulls were given extra care from irrational attack. The farmers in the Marutham and Mullai areas had kept their own herds of cattle since possessing a herd represented social status. There were lots of pasture grounds in the Mullai and Kurinji, but no individual cow stands were present in any of the tracts. The ploughman from the agricultural field would frequently allow their oxen (pakadu) to graze on forest land in those days (Purananooru or Pura: 395: 1-2) [1]. In Mullai lands, fruit tree and crops were raised for cattle.

The word Madu, which originally meant wealth, was used to refer to both land and livestock. The cultivators were referred to as Erudu-daiyan Velalan because cattle are a symbol of riches associated with land (Naanmanikkadigai or Nanmani: 55) [2].

In those days, individual status was determined by the land and livestock he owned because they represented wealthiest. Many of the inscriptions found in the temples of Tamil Nadu contain the details about the gift of lands and cattle made by the kings and individuals.

Dairy farming played a significant role in the economy since people consumed a lot of milk and milk products. The word "wealth" was adopted because maadu (cattle) was seen as a symbol of wealth (Thirukkural, 400) (Manavalan, 2014). Brahmins abandoned the custom of sacrificing cows during the yaga performance.

Cowherds and shepherds were generally known in the Mullai as 'ayar'. Shepherds (poduvar), goat herders (Adudai-idaimagan) and cowherds, cattle herders (kovalar, kollaikkovalar) were common in both agricultural and pastoral tracts (Narrinai or Nat: 266 and 289) [3]; whereas the cattle herders in the Palai tract were known as 'kudavar' and one with herds of cattle was a 'niraipalakuliea' (Akananuru

or Aka: 393: 1-16) [3]. Cattle herders (males) were called 'ayar' and women cattle herder as 'aymagal' (Pura: 33 and 215). They were also variously known as Idaiyan (Pura: 54, 324 and 331), Kovalar (Nat: 69, 264, 265 and 289) and Idaimagan (Nat: 142 and 169).

Among the numerous ruminants mentioned in the texts, the important domesticated animals are bull (eru, erudu, kalai), buffaloes (erumai, pakadu, karan, kulavi), aan (cow), milk cow (karavai), young cow (nagu), calves of cow or buffalo (kandru), goat (adu, puruvai, turu), young goat (mari), mountain goat (varudai). Cattle herds and goat herds are mentioned as 'nirai' and 'ayam' and 'tholuthi' and 'thodu' respectively.

Cattle or sheep rearing was the dominant mode of resource use in most of the areas. According to the literature, it was predominant in the Mullai region. The term "idaiyar" was used to describe those who raised cattle. Cattle were treated as wealth as indicated by the term. The frequent raids conducted by the chiefs, mainly to steal the cattle suggest the importance of cattle. Except for Kerala, where no Early Historic habitation sites have been investigated, archaeological evidence demonstrates the dispersal of cattle and sheep over most of Tamil Nadu. The people from the dry agro-pastoral regions seem to have dominated the political scenario.

Kambar gives a detailed account on bulls that serve in agriculture. Bulls were used in a number of agricultural tasks, including the ploughing of the soil to the harvest. Usually, two bulls were utilised for land ploughing. Kambar says that, on the auspicious day, the bulls were tied to the plough [4]. As the yoke of the plough was tied on the neck of the bull, a scar formed on the neck of the bull, which was called Suvarkarai. This marking on the bull's neck is compared by Kambar to the blue neck of the Siva god. He further says that even though there was enough rain, the cultivation depended on the strength of the bulls.

Seven of the 15 poems in Mullaik Kali (a part of Kalithogai which describes the significance of bull) (Kalithogai, 101) [5] have been devoted to Eru Thazhuvuthal (taming of a bull to win the hand of a girl). A victory in the competition was a source of pride and a mark of bravery for the male, and it was confirmation for the girl that she had made the proper choice in a partner. A pass in this test was a must even if a boy and a girl were in love with each other.

Pongal is celebrated to venerate the cattle and to worship them [6]. This is especially significant in rural areas where cattle are not only wealth but provide sustenance to the family with their milk or their labour. On the day of Pongal, the calves are garlanded, given a wash, and have their horns painted in vibrant patterns. Turmeric and vermilion are applied to their foreheads; they are ritually worshipped and given Pongal (a sweet dish made of rice, jaggery or sometimes prepared salty with dal), sugarcane and other choice food to eat. On the Mattu Pongal day, Eru Thazhuvuthal or manjuvirattu (bull taming sport played in Tamil Nadu as a part of Pongal celebration) games are held in several villages in and around middle and southern parts of Tamil Nadu.

This is celebrated to venerate the cattle during the Tamil New year (Thai festival -April 14th of every year) in the Cauvery delta region of Tamil Nadu where agriculture is treated as part of their life. The ploughs are washed; and turmeric, sandal wood paste and vermilion are applied to the shanks of the plough. Group of relatives will gather together in a field in order to celebrate this function. A special recipe called Avi-arisi is prepared for veneration. After worshipping the Sun, elders of the family are asked to plough the field once and sow the seeds followed by watering. This will be continued by the rest of the family members/relatives.

Cattle raiding in Sangam period pose an interesting and challenging topic covering aspects of seizure (Vetchi) and recovery (Karandai) of cattle. Tolkappiyar in his first verses of Purattinaiyiyal (In Tolkappiyam, this section defines the modes of one's public life) explains about 'vetchi' or cattle raiding [7].

The account of cattle wealth from ancient Sangam literatures clearly indicates the importance of cattle to our forefathers, thus indicating the enormous cattle-wealth of this period.

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