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Pennaiyar River Basin

A Review on Literary, Archaeological and Tourism Aspects

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Abstract:

Extensive field surveys done by various eminent scholars since the beginning of the 19th century in various zones of Tamilnadu had contributed to the understanding and enhancing our knowledge on the cultural processes of human life from the Palaeolithic to the Historical times. A few unique discoveries made at various sites were helpful in determining the hiatus between various cultural periods. Some of the findings were helpful in understanding the cultural linkages between various cultural zones. The river valleys form a primary factor in the studies of the various eco - zones of a region. Various river valleys of Tamilnadu like Palar, Pennaiyar, Vaigai and Kaveri have varied resources their deltaic regions.

The study area is considered as one of the important places in South India. It has a rich archaeological potential which could be studied in a deeper account. Pennaiyar (or) Thenpennai, previously called as Ponnaiyar (Takshina Pinakini) rises in the Chennarayan Betta hills in Karnataka and flows southwards and turn to east through eastern ghats for entering the Hosur taluk of Krishnagiri district. Later travelling through the Dharmapuri district it enters Thiruvannamalai district through Chengam pass. Villupuram and Cuddalore districts are later drained by this river. The river valley forms into two divisions namely upper and lower river valley. Geomorphologically they vary in many aspects resulting in two different cultural zones. The upper and mid Pennaiyar has four major tributaries namely Markandanadi (also called Cinnaru) Turunchi, Pampar, and Vaniyar and runs deep into the valley, which is hardly useful for any agricultural purpose. The upper Pennaiyar valley is basically a basin area and the lower Pennaiyar valley is deltaic in nature. The upper river valley yielded a vast cultural materials assignable to wide range of period from Palaeolithic to Medieval. Unlike the upper valley the lower valley had only limited field surveys. The surveys carried out also exposed number of burial monuments.

The areas bounding the Pennaiyar river basin was known to the Sangam poets, which is reflected in their writings. For instance the cheiften Nannan belonging to the Sei clan (Naagar family), who ruled over the Chengam region (Chengai Ma), is mentioned in Purnaanuru (151), (S.I.I. Vol VII. No.s II 126) (S.I.I. Vol VIII. No. 69). He is also mentioned as Cevvarainaatan in Perumpanaarrupada (103). The Pennaiyar river basin encloses sites which served as important places during the Sangam age. The river Cheyyar is mentioned as Cēyāru in Malaipatukatam (476, 555), that traverse the red mountain region and drains the red soil. The same work also mentions a hill called Naviram (Malaipatukatam : 82, 579), situated on the northern bank of Cheyyar. This site is situated in between Thiruvannamalai and Dharmapuri and was ruled by Atiyaman a chieftain. This area is popularly known as Chengam pass, used by the people of the Tondai nadu in the ancient period to enter the Takaturnadu, of which the ruler was Atiyman Neduman Anci during the Sangam period.

This region has innumerable number of Megalithic burials of various types which find due mention in the Sangam literature. Plenty of references to Megalithic practices are noticed in the Sangam literature. Tolkappiyam (Nacchinarkkiniyam, Porulathikaram – Purathinaiyiyal (60: 19-20), the oldest Tamil grammer, a pre - Sangam enumerates the various stages of erecting monuments for the heroes who sacrificed their life in the battle. Later literary works belonging to 11th – 12th centuries A.D like Thakkaiyagaparani (376), Vikramacholan Ula (11:14-16) Kulothunga Cholan Ula (11:23-24), etc also refer to the burial monuments in various verses. All these works reveal the reason for the erection of the monuments, environmental and other related factors which prompted the people to build such a big burial memorials, various types of burials, their evolution and development features etc.

With this view a critical and detailed study on the Pennaiyar river basin which embodies enormous natural resources envisaging various aspects of anthropology, archaeology, geology and other related fields was done. It endeavors a deep study to understand the various cultural traits that developed in the present study area. The study is also done to estimate the potentiality and relationship of various sites pertaining to various cultural periods. The study includes the spatial distribution, chronology, architecture and iconography of the sculptures to trace the ancient history of the region.

The present districts which were drained by this river basin yielded nearly 500 sites. The archaeological sites unearthed in this river basin are assignable to different periods range from palaeolithic times down to historic times passing through microlithic, neolithic, iron age, early Historic, medieval and modern historical periods. The materials unearthed from these sites help us in tracing the ancient history of this river basin particularly.

The Chengam region in the Thiruvannamalai district mentioned in the Sangam works is important archaeologically. The herostones found in this region opened a new vista in the historical studies. These stones help us in tracing the socio-cultural and political history of this region. The unearthed potsherds found in association with the roman potteries at Andipatti plays an important role in the studies of the trade contact of the people of this region with outside world.

The Pennaiyar river basin is a vast track of dissected pediments and pediplains. The Eastern ghats consists of residual hills in this part viz., Chinna Kalrayan, Javadis, Yelagiri, Shervaroyans, Chitteri, Kollimalai, Pachchaimalai. The Eastern Ghats rise steeply above the plateau level of 1,100-1, 600 m the Javadis and to 1,525-1, 650m in the Shevroys. The above hill ranges comprises of Chamokite group of rocks consisting of Charnokite, gneiss, Cuddalore sand stone and other types. All these constituents belong to Archean family of rocks of Precambrian age which are dated to 3000 Ma ((Ma - Million years before present). These rock formations help us in tracing the Palaeo - environments – ancient environments. These hills yielded sites pertaining to various cultural periods ranging from palaeolithic to other later periods. This identification of sites shows the continuous settlement over a long span of time in these areas.

The Kalrayan hills comprises of nearly 9 Neolithic sites and more than 18 Megalithic sites. The presence of different types of material evidences with respect to different cultural periods attests to the continuous existence of settlement in this region. The Kollimalai Hills are featured in several works of classical Tamil literature such as Silappathikaram, Manimekalai, Purnaanuru and Ainkurnuru. The region was ruled by Valvil Ori around 200 A.D., who is praised as one of the seven great philanthropists of ancient Tamil Nadu.

Extensive field surveys done by various eminent scholars since the beginning of the 19th century in various zones of Tamilnadu had contributed to the understanding and enhancing our knowledge of the cultural processes of human life from the Palaeolithic to the Historical times. A few unique discoveries made at various sites were helpful in determining the hiatus between various cultural periods. Some of the findings were helpful in understanding the cultural linkages between various cultural zones.

The geology, topography, and other related factors have a crucial role in the formation of different cultural phases of Tamilnadu. The resources, different types of technologies adapted (for manufacturing different types of stone tools and in the later period the metal objects) and the possible instincts survived made the people to create a new settlements (transformation of nomadic life to agro – pastoral and in later period society based on economic condition due to the development in the metal technology) in a place where they lived over the centuries. The river valleys form a primary factor in the studies of the various eco - zones of a region. Various river valleys of Tamilnadu like Palar, Pennaiyar, Vaigai and Kaveri have varied resources on their Deltaic regions.

The study area is considered as one of the important places in South India. It has a rich archaeological potential which could be studied in a deeper account. Pennaiyar (or) Thenpennai, previously called as Ponnaiyar (Takshina Pinakini) rises in the Chennarayan Betta hills in Karnataka and flows southwards and turn to east through eastern ghats for entering the Hosur Taluk of Krishnagiri district. Later, travelling through the Dharmapuri district it enters Thiruvannamalai district through Chengam pass. Villupuram and Cuddalore districts are later drained by this river. The river valley forms into two divisions namely upper and lower river valley. Geomorphologically they vary in many aspects, resulting in two different cultural zones. The upper and mid Pennaiyar has four major tributaries namely Markandanadi (also called Cinnaru) Turunchi, Pampar, and Vaniyar and runs deep into the valley, which is hardly useful for any agricultural purpose. The upper Pennaiyar valley is basically a basin area and the lower Pennaiyar valley is deltaic in nature. The upper river valley yielded a vast cultural materials, assignable to a wide range of period from Palaeolithic to Medieval. Unlike the upper valley the lower valley had only limited field surveys. The surveys carried out also exposed a number of burial monuments.

The areas bounding the Pennaiyar river basin was known to the Sangam poets, which is reflected in their writings. For instance the cheiften Nannan belonging to the Sei clan (Naagar family), who ruled over the Chengam region (Chengai Ma), is mentioned in Purnaanuru (151), (S.I.I. Vol VII. No.s II 126) (S.I.I. Vol VIII. No. 69). He is also mentioned as Cevvarainaat in Perumpanaarrupadai (103). The Pennaiyar river basin encloses sites which served as important places during the Sangam age. The river Cheyyar is mentioned as Cēyāru in Malaipatukatam (476, 555), that traverse the red mountain region and drains the red soil. The same work also mentions a hill called Naviram (Malaipatukatam : 82, 579), situated on the northern bank of Cheyyar. This site is situated in between Thiruvannamalai and Dharmapuri and was ruled by Atiyaman a chieftain. This area is popularly known as Chengam pass, used by the people of the Tondai nadu in the ancient period to enter the Takaturnadu, of which the ruler was Atiyaman Neduman Anci during the Sangam period.

This region has innumerable number of Megalithic burials of various types which find due mention in the Sangam literature. Plenty of references to Megalithic practices are noticed in the Sangam literature. Tolkappiyam (Nacchinarkkiniyam, Porulathikaram – Purathinaiyiyal (60: 19-20), the oldest Tamil grammer, a pre - Sangam enumerates the various stages of erecting monuments for the heroes who sacrificed their life in the battle. The Sangam texts like Akananuru (109: 7-8, 157:5, 231:6), Purananuru (221:13, 223:3, 239: 20-21, 363:10) Ainkurunuru (352:1-2, 362:1), Narrinai (352:8, 271:11-12), Kurunthokai (372:5), Malaipadukadam (388:2), Pathirrupatthu (44:11, 22-23) and post Sangam work like Manimekalai (6: 66-67) refer to burials, their customs and the funeral rituals; and also describe vividly the Tamil society at the beginning of the Christian era. Sangam works record the wide prevalence of the custom of erecting herostones which existed in more number in this river basin. Sangam works mention many places and personalities relevant to the present study area.

Later literary works belonging to 11th – 12th centuries A.D like Thakkaiyagaparani (376), Vikramacholan Ula (11:14-16) Kulothunga Cholan Ula (11:23-24), etc. also refer to the burial monuments in various verses. All these works reveal the reason for the erection of the monuments, environmental and other related factors which prompted the people to build such a big burial memorials, various types of burials, their evolution and development features etc.

With this view a critical and detailed study on the Pennaiyar river basin, which embodies enormous natural resources envisaging various aspects of anthropology, archaeology, geology and other related fields were done. It endeavors a deep study to understand the various cultural traits that developed in the present study area. The study is also done to estimate the potentiality and the relationship of various sites pertaining to various cultural periods. The study includes the spatial distribution, chronology, architecture and iconography of the sculptures to trace the ancient history of the region.

The present districts which were drained by this river basin yielded nearly 500 sites.¹ The archaeological sites unearthed in this river basin are assignable to different periods range from palaeolithic times down to historic times passing through microlithic, neolithic, iron age, early Historic, medieval and modern historical periods. The materials unearthed from these sites help us in tracing the ancient history of this river basin particularly. Robert Bruce Foote, who made pre-historic study in this river valley identified rude implements of a black trap rock near Barugur in 1887². On the basis of the workmanship he dated it to the palaeolithic period. Later, B. Narasimhaiah explored this region in the later arts of sixties and identified many sites pertaining to different cultural periods. He identified few tools near Kapplavadi and classified those under the Pre-Neolithic phase. He also identified five Neolithic sites at Gollapalli, Togarapalli, Pannimaduvu, Dailamalai, and Mullikadu.³ The excavation conducted at Mayiladumparai⁴ which yielded one - metre long cultural deposit proves us the existence of Mesolithic culture in this region. A large number of tools found in a square meter area shows the richness of microlithic cultural assemblage. Numerous evidences pertaining to the Iron Age cultural traits have been noticed in this river valley. Megalithic burial monuments like cairn circle entombing cist variety (noticed in Hosur, Denkanikottai and Krishnagiri taluks), dolmens and dolmenoid cists (Kaveripattinam and Mattur in Kuppam and Tiruppattur passes), sarcophagus (could be an intrusion from the neighbouring coastal districts)⁵ are seen scattered in more number with the urn burials which seems to be an indigenous cultural trait in this region.

The material remains exposed in this river valley suggests the transformation of the cultural assemblages. Nomadic hunting and gathering life has been moved to pastoral and agro pastoral way of life and finally into the early historic period, which is evidenced from the occurrence of Hero – Stones⁶ with Vatteluttu and Tamil-Brahmi inscribed potsherd and graffiti marks. The region under study had continuous occupation from the prehistoric period to the present day with various stages of development. The excavations and the material evidences unearthed at Mayiladumparai and Modur proves that the early Tamil society which faced the transformation from Iron age to Early Historic period was continuous. The continuity of culture could be understood by the evidence of other Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions in a transitional stage. One such site is the Nekanurpatti which had a Tamil-Brahmi inscription datable to 3-4th century A.D on palaeographical ground⁷.

Apart from this rock paintings engraved both on the surface of rock – shelter and on the orthostats of dolmens are encountered in this region. Red and White pigments were used in these paintings. The scenes depicting the changes in the subsistence pattern ie., from hunting and gathering to cattle

raising to cattle raising and cattle raiding could be seen in these paintings. In two locations rock paintings are found in this region, one at ceilings of the rock shelters and other at the dolmens. These painting were identified from the sites like Mayiladumparai, Kuruvinayanapalli, Koothalappadi, Maharaajakadai, Oramanakkunda, Otthikuppam, Oppathavaadi, Mallachandram etc. which are seen scattered in the districts like Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri and Thiruvannamalai districts.⁸

The Chengam region in the Thiruvannamalai district mentioned in the Sangam works is important archaeologically. The herostones found in this region opened a new vista in the historical studies. These stones help us in tracing the socio-cultural and political history of this region. The unearthed potsherds found in association with the roman potteries at Andipatti⁹ plays an important role in the studies of the trade contact of the people of this region with outside world. Excavations at Kappalavadi,¹⁰ Kuttur,¹¹ Mallapadi,¹² Modur,¹³ Mullikadu,¹⁴ Paiyampalli,¹⁵ Panaikulam,¹⁶ Togarapalli,¹⁷ Varatanapalli,¹⁸ Adhiyamankottai,¹⁹ Mallachandram,²⁰ Mayiladumparai²¹ etc. Palaeolithic tools like hand axe, ovate, chopper, awl-cum-scraper, wedge, blade and megalithic burial monuments have identified from Kappalavadi. Kuttur yielded Neolithic tools and Megalithic artifacts. Robert Bruce Foote identified few new tools at Bargur nearer to Kuttur. Two of the Black and Red ware sherds had Graffiti marks. Important symbols like Trident are noted. Beads made out of conch, glass, bone and semiprecious beads like Jasper, Carnelian, etc have been unearthed. Modur yielded Neolithic celt, habitation mound, Neolithic potteries like grey ware, coarse red ware, cairn circle entombing urn, copper objects, potsherds with graffiti marks, russet coated ware, shell bangles, smoking pipes have all been excavated out. On the basis of material evidences unearthed the cultural periods in Payampalli is divided into two i.e., Neolithic and Megalithic periods. Neolithic period is divided into two Phases. Phase I yielded grey ware pottery, bone implements, etc. Excavation revealed pit dwellings in which some of the floors are paved with stones and had postholes on the floors which proves that it was covered with shed.

Athiyamaan Kottai excavations revealed three cultural periods like Phase I,II,III. Excavation yielded terracotta objects, semiprecious stone beads, conch objects, head portion of a woman, image of Hanuman, iron implements, coins etc. The excavated materials from other sites too suggest that these sites were in continuous occupation from the Prehistoric times to the Early Historic period. The life style of the people transformed from the hunting and gathering to pastoral and then to agro pastoral life.

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The Yelagiri hills are considered to be the Ooty of the poor and middle class people as it is thronged by tourists although the year. It is also one of the famous places for trekkers in India.

The Kalrayan hills comprises of nearly 9 Neolithic sites and more than 18 Megalithic sites²². The presence of different types of material evidences with respect to different cultural periods attests to the continuous existence of settlement in this region. The Kollimalai Hills are featured in several works of classical Tamil literature such as Silapathikaaram, Manimekalai, Purananuru and Ainkurunuru. The region was ruled by Valvil Ori around 200 A.D., who is praised as one of the seven great philanthropists of ancient Tamil Nadu. This mountain range is relatively untouched by commercial tourism so it retained its natural beauty even today. The people believe that this hill range got its name from the name of the goddess called Kollipaavai²³ or Ettukkai Amman a local deity, which means that this goddess is guarding the people of the hills from evils.

Shevaroy Hills are one of the low mountain range near the town of Salem. The local name for this hills have been arrived from a local deity, Servarayan, which means Chera King.²⁴ Widespread bauxite deposits are the basis for aluminum processing plants at Mettur and Yercaud.

All most all these hill ranges were inhabited by The Malayalis (literally meaning mountain people) who are the principal inhabitants. They call themselves as Malaikaran, male Gounder and also believe that they originally belonged to the Vellalla caste of cultivators and migrated from Kancipuram to the hills of southwest Tamilnadu a few generations ago. According to Thurston the term Malayali has been derived from the words Malai (hill), al (person) and is used to denote hill people.²⁵ But he is of the opinion that this tribal community (who call themselves as Malaivazh Makkal) could not be treated as the other ancient tribes like Thodas (of Nilgiris) and Badugas (who are called as Pazhangudi Makkal). It is because of the fact that they speak Tamil unlike other tribes mentioned above. Also the life style of the Malayali tribes were not similar to the above said ethnic tribes. This proves that the settlement of these tribes could be only later than the other ancient tribes of Tamilnadu. The excavated records and the archaeological evidences by the Archaeological Survey of India described that some of the tribal caves belonged to the Neolithic period estimated to be 4000 years old. Prior to Malyalis, hunters were the predominant groups in the above mentioned hill ranges. The Malayali tribe invaded areas of hunters and settled on these hill slopes which started changing the eco-systems of the forest. This is also represented by the change in the agricultural activity from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. They are the poorest people who are very deceptive. The usual approach and presumption on their life can lead to a total misreading of the social reality and its dynamics. It is a fact that the forests and the distinct culture of the tribes are diminishing foreseeing disastrous consequences. The presence of innumerable number of megalithic burial monuments confirms that the origin of the tribes related to the Proto historic culture. The shape and size of the burials present in these hills give an affirmation that they might be Kullers (short persons) or the early tribes who lived as hunters much earlier to the invasion of Malayali tribes. The Eastern Ghats are also the main bio-diversity hotspots of India and hosts numerous species plants which are of high medicinal values.

Basically Malayali tribe is an agricultural community which gradually shifted from the subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. The transition represents the change in eco – system. The food habits reflects the subsistence economy and the agricultural pattern.²⁶ Minor Millets, raagi, maize, corn etc. are the important varieties of grains of this community people. At present the consumption pattern of the Malayalis has been gradually shifted to include rice and wheat. The influence of modern agriculture and cash crops has been brought to compromise the consumption pattern in favour of high yielding food crops. The best among the Patta land of Malayali Tribe is used for paddy cultivation.

Forest ranges like Karungalaipadipatti, Anandavadi, Thuringhapuram, Kallavi, Anchatti etc. served as important sources, as the ancient people had selected these places for their settlement as they fulfilled their requirements. These forests protect the indigenous bio – diversity of them. The tribal people have frequent interaction with the outside community and the market forces, which initiated a change in their culture and consumption pattern. The important aspects to be taken into consideration is the environmental conservation, which is the integral part of the socio – economic development. The total forest area of districts which lies under this river basin varies according to each district. Among the available area Krishnagiri districts accounts for about 39.4%, Dharmapuri district accounts for 36.5% in the forest areas.²⁷

The presence of varied natural resources, river valley, hilly terrains (preferably the main source of rocks used for the construction of Megalithic burials) reserve forests, life style of the people in hilly areas etc interestingly makes us to understand the history of the district right from the

Prehistoric period to the Early historical period, though extensive exploration has been done for the past few years in this area, it tends to yield more and more sites, which are of archaeological importance, which shows that there was continuous habitation in this district right from the prehistoric period to early historic period.

These explorations yielded different types of potteries, coins, constructional remains, glass objects and various other material evidences. Hence the explored sites should be systematically and scientifically studied.

However, the systematic field works would lead us to unearth innumerable number of cultural wealth pertaining to the different cultural traits. The observations made on the cultural vestiges and the extensive and critical studies on the material evidences collected so far would lead us to trace the ancient history of this region from Palaeolithic to Historical period. The present study would be a source book for the future research works which would enhance and enrich the ancient history of this to a great extent.

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