

Tamilian Historiography – A Subaltern Approach

Prof. P. Basith Assarani

*PG & Research Department of History,
Islamiah College, Vaniyambadi-635752, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email: basi.reborn@gmail.com*

Elitist bias in historiography in Europe came under severe criticism from some French Scholars. Marc Bloch and Lucien Febure were the leading light among them. They came to be called as historians of the Annales School. In the 1920s they urged the need to study history from below. From then onwards Subaltern studies attracted the attention of serious scholars all over the world. In the 1980s Ranajit Guha and his disciples founded the school of Subaltern studies in India. Guha and his followers focused attention on bringing to light the Voice of the Voiceless Masses in Indian history. In a dozen scholarly volumes brought out by this school eminent scholars have effectively focused their discussions on Subaltern issues. In the post-independence period, Marxist historiography made a deep impact on Indian historians. Subaltern studies have also become popular to a certain extent. N.T.Vanamamalai¹ and Dr.K.K.Kesavan² can be regarded as pioneers in this respect. Other scholars like B.Sobhanam³, Yesudas⁴, Hanumanthan⁵ and S.Manickam⁶ have brought out scholarly works on Subaltern themes. Barring a few, others have simply treated Subaltern protests in an episodic manner.

Oxford University defines the term Subaltern as one belonging to an ‘inferior rank’.

Rejecting the elitist conception of history, Subaltern school of historiographers attempt to bring under the list of history makers the entire people “subordinated in terms of class, caste, sex and office or in any other way”. The purport of this paper is to draw the attention of young scholars to Subaltern issues in Tamil Nadu so as to enable them to pursue indepth studies on Subaltern themes.

A fairly developed, agrarian economy, provided the base for the emergence of political organisations in the river valleys of Tamil Nadu, by about 3rd century B.C. Gradually, areas under cultivation increased owing to the introduction of irrigation projects and reclamation of forests and dry lands. In such an agrarian society power and wealth were concentrated in a minority consisting of Princes, Brahmins and Vellalas under a variety of land tenures in operation. Whatever maybe the tenure,

peasants, sharecroppers and slaves, the real producing classes were sufferers prone to harassment and exploitation. These exploitations reached such proportions as to force the oppressed peasantry to show signs of protest taking different forms from place to place. Of the four eco-regions in Tamil Nadu, Marutham had all the potentialities for developing into cultural units. The soil there was so fertile as to make a sangam bard to observe that “one veli of land was capable of producing thousand kalams of paddy.”⁷ Agricultural technology seems to have reached a fairly advanced level as vouched by Sangam works, K.K.Pillai cites a number of references from sangam works to activities like transplantation, crop rotation, manuring, the use of sluices and shutters.⁸

The earliest form of land tenure was known as Vellanvagai, in which land was commonly held by Vellalas. Vellanvagai villages were composed of Uluvithunpor, Uluthunpor, Tenants, Vinaivalar, Ulathiar etc., while uluvithunpor controlled large areas of land and cultivated the land with the help of sharecroppers and slaves, uluthunpor were holding small pieces of land which they themselves cultivated. The lowest class known as “Kadasiyar” in the sangam works was equivalent to the slaves of medieval Europe. Kanakasabaipillai’s assessment that “Tamil Civilization of the Sangam period was superior to other culture because slavery was unknown amongst the Tamils” does not stand the scrutiny of modern scholarship.⁹ Kailasapathy for instance citing Tolkappiam observes that Sangam society was highly graded and slaves, servants, errandmen etc., were not entitled to be portrayed as heroes in poems.¹⁰ No wonder tenants and serfs of the Vellanvagai villages were not only at the mercy of the perungudi but also the vagaries of climate. At times of draught tenants had to eat up the seed corn as there was no income from the land. To the labouring classes the landlords denied the minimum “to keep their body and soul together.”¹¹

The post sangam period when the Kalabhras had their hegemony was characterised by economic stagnation. However, agriculture economy revived under the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas. Large scale agrarian expansion facilitated by canal and tank irrigation schemes was the characteristic feature of Tamil Nadu since the days of the Pallavas. Instances of colonisation are also there on record. It is believed that 48,000 vellalas from Tanjore were permanently settled in Tondaimandalam with Kaniyatchi rights. 1900 villages each village provided with service communities and “mauniems” of different types were established. Vellalas were allowed to exercise “the right of buying, selling, pledging and giving in free gift of pariah and certain other caste slaves.”¹² Brahmadeya and Devadhana tenures synchronised with the revival of Hinduism in Tamil Nadu through the Bakthi Movement. Later another type of service tenure known as Jivitham began to emerge in the medieval times. Karasima produces evidences for the appearance of individual land tenures in the lower kaveri region

during the imperial Chola period consequent on the purchase of lands by soldiers of fortune with the money got as share from foreign booties¹³.

The medieval agrarian system was such that every village had to come under any one of the land tenures discussed above. There was corporate ownership in vellanvagai villages. In the Brahmadeyas, Brahmins were the non-cultivating land owners where as the non-brahmin communities either as tenants or serfs engaged in agricultural operations. Devadhana lands were least in most cases to Brahmins. Here subletting was resorted to. Whenever peripheral regions were subjugated the tribals, the hitherto occupants of the lands were accommodated in the agrarian system either as peasants or serfs. The Proliteration of small peasants was due to the grant of service tenures both by the state as well as by village assemblies.

Tenancy cultivation was vogue in medieval period, tenants paid a fixed amount commonly known as Melvaram to the land owners and retained the remaining amount as their share. Known as kutikal or kutimakkal, tenants continued to exist as an exploited class. Melvaram collected from the tenants was very heavy varying from 1/3 to 2/3 of the produce as indicated by inscriptions. Tenants in Tinnevely and Ramnad had to pay from 240 to 260 kalams per veli as Melvaram which was equivalent to 50% of the total produce¹⁴. Another source of trouble came to the tenants when overzealous monarchs assigned land grants to Brahmins evicting (Kutineeki) them from their lands, which they tilled for many years¹⁵. In some cases administrative and fiscal control were given to temples. In such cases temple authorities harassed the tenants for non-payment of arrears. For the maintenance of the existing temples and the consecration of new temples tenants were forced to pay additional amounts.

Discontentment among the peasants, displeased as they were due to harassment from landlords as well as officials resulted in protests which manifested in different forms in different areas. These protests were strong during strong governments and vice versa. Peasant protests were more visible during the later chola period. According to N.Vanamamalai these protests were in the form of suicide, refusal to pay taxes and in some cases open riots. A dancing girl by name Chathuri Manickam is stated by an inscription to have ended her life by falling from the temple tower in an attempt to establish the right of her relative to till the land assigned to her as jivitham. Another record tells that temple guards committed suicide by leaping into the flames of fire lit before the temple to establish their right over the land assigned to them as jivitham which the temple authorities grabbed from them.

An inscription from Aduthurai speaks about the illtreatment meted out by Brahmin landlords and government officials against the 98 Idangai castes. In what is regarded as a strange coming together of 98 valangai and 98 idangai castes known for their perpetual rivalry decided in a meeting not to pay any tax levied by the village Sabha in protest against a new tax imposed on them with the approval of the Muventhavelan, the government official. They refused to undertake agricultural operations demanding

action to be taken against the official concerned. Edgar Thuston narrates a story of a strange protest by the village servants of Melur region against their Vellala masters. Though Melur was a Vellalanadu to begin with, Kallas emigrated to Melur and settled there permanently as servants of the Vellala landlords. They served their masters faithfully. But when Vellalas began to punish them for small offences, they rebelled against them in such a severe fashion that in due course all Vellalas evacuated Melur converting it into a Kallar Nadu.

This picture about the early medieval agrarian economy will not be complete if the life of the lowest stratum of the society is not portrayed. Servility resulted from the immutable rules of caste system. As a general rule slaves were attached with and sold along with the land. They were condemned to live in exclusive quarters designated as Cheri outside villages.

According to an inscription issued in the 43rd regional year of Kulothunga, Village servants were curtailed from moving from their villages. Vetti or compulsory labour was extracted from them. Kadamai Uliyar Amanji is other terms used to describe free labour during medieval times. Slaves were coerced by the state to build and repair irrigation works in the dry season and to quarry and transport stone for palaces and temples, make roads and drag heavy palanquins of royalty priestly authorities and temple deities. Unfortunately nobody not even the slave himself was interested in his redemption for as Manu whose law governed social relations stated "Better is death in the fulfilment of one's duty for to follow another".

Colonial government's economic and revenue policies were not only self-centred but also harmful to the lower peasantry. Hence unorganized peasant protests were a common phenomenon. The masses of the farmers of Paramathi and Perundurairi villages in the Krishnagiri district were revolt against the British Government for collection of excessive tax and their oppressive policy in 1799¹⁶. As early as 1802, The village revenue accountants (*Kanakkar*) of Denkanikottai and Ottoor of Baramahal, collected more taxes than prescribed but receipts for payments were also not issued. The equal tax amount was demanded from the barren lands. The *takkavi* loans sanctioned by the Government were not disbursed to the villagers. The aggrieved peasants of Denkanikottai and Ottoor of Baramahal sent a delegation consisting of 30 persons of Madras demanding redressal of grievances born out of the wrong revenue policy of collector Cockburn. As nothing came out of their representation, nearly 1500 agitating peasants had to be evacuated with the help of cavalry¹⁷. Peasants of the same area organized a large-scale protest in 1810 with some specific demands. The agitation of the peasants grew so strong that the government had to concede their demands. In 1827, the peasants of Sirkali expressed their protest against the heavy taxation by refusing to cultivate their lands. Both peasants and artisans of Chengalpet district faced police firing in 1854 when they protested against inequitable taxes. The peasant movements in Tanjore in the 1950s and 1960s deserve special mention because these movements were organized on a class basis rather than on caste basis. Innumerable protests of these sorts need to be studied.

Awareness on socio-economic inequality provided a conducive atmosphere for organized movements. In this connection upper cloth movement and Muthukutty's religious reform movement can be cited as examples. In the erstwhile Travancore state, women belonging to low castes were prohibited from to wear upper cloth. Nadar women struggled hard to get their legitimate rights. With the help of the missionaries they achieved their goal. Lower strata of society in Travancore besides suffering from social inequality were also economically oppressed. As many hundreds of taxes were imposed on them. They were also forced to render compulsory labour not only to the government but also to the high caste landlords¹⁸. Muthukutty organized the oppressed communities against social injustice. In his mission he encountered oppression from the government as well as high castes. It is not wrong to state that the religion preached by Ramalingam Adigal reflects subaltern consciousness in abundant measure. Narayana Guru's Ilava movement brought about substantive changes in the lives of Ilavas, now an advanced community but remained marginalized for centuries. Ayothi Das and Erattamalai Srinivasan initiated the Adidravida movement, which in future culminated in securing rights to the marginalized. In the post-independence period many movements demanding socio-economic equality have occurred. These movements are to be viewed as manifestations of subaltern consciousness.

Lower castes in Tamilnadu had no right to enter agamic temples. In the closing years of the 19th century, Nadars in the southern districts of Tamilnadu clamoured for the right to enter such temples. The Varnsharama Dharma ideology was so strong that all castes other than Nadars formed a united front to oppose the Nadar claims. The causes and consequences of the temple entry movement requires an indepth study because it represents a clash between the old Varnashrama Dharma ideology and modern idea of social equality. Twentieth century Tamilnadu has seen a lot of organized movements. The Justice Movement and the Self Respect Movement were born in an atmosphere where relative deprivation in social, economic and political fields forced the Non-Brahmin majority to forge a Dravidian identity in order to secure its rights. These movements have brought about substantial changes deserving a Subaltern historiographical treatment.

Subaltern dissent was present from time immemorial. Relative deprivation, awakening on the part of the subaltern groups, presence of counter ideologies and appearances of charismatic leaders acted as determinants of Subaltern protests. These factors sometimes worked together. In some cases even an individual factor induced social protests. Followers of some of the movements rallied under common ideologies as well as flags. Historical writings in majority of the cases have ignored the masses in the history making process. North, South dichotomy, linguistic chauvinism, caste prejudices and colonial interests have resulted in the production of distorted historical writings.

In this connection, it is pertinent to note that works on Vaikom Sathyagraha based on North Indian and South Indian sources depict two different pictures. It is common knowledge that Periyar was the key player in the Vaikom Sathyagraha. But the Congress mouthpiece, the “Young India”, saw to it that Periyar did not find a place in its columns. It is believed that Varnashramites were against giving Periyar his due place. The result was that Gandhi was depicted as the hero. An attempt to impose the mainstream ideology on the Tamil society was regarded by Periyar as an invasion on Tamil culture. Insurance of giving colour to Periyar’s activities by the high caste-controlled contemporary press are numerous. History written from the Subaltern angle alone can rectify this defect.

For writing the history of the marginalized sections, traditional sources are not sufficient. One has to tap into the untapped sources available in the form of folk literature and folk arts. An interdisciplinary approach is the need of the hour.

REFERENCES

- [1] N.T.Vanamamalai, *Tamilar Nattupadalgal*: Chennai, 1964
- [2] Dr.K.K.Kesavan, *Pallu Ilakkiam-Oru Samugavial Parvai*: Sivagangai, 1971 and *Koil Nuzhaigu Porattangal*: Villupuram, 1997
- [3] B.Sobhanam, *Temple entry Movement and Sivakasi Riots*: Madurai, 1985
- [4] Yesudas, *A People’s Revolt in Travancore*: Trivandrum, 1975
- [5] Hanumanthan, *Untouchability: A Historical Study*: Madurai, 1979
- [6] S.Manickam, *Slavery in the Tamil Country*: Madras, 1982
- [7] K.A.N Sastri, *The Cholas*, Madras 1975, p.66
- [8] K.K.Pillay, *A Social History of the Tamils*, Vol.I, Madras, 2nd Edi, 1975, p.196
- [9] V.Kanakasabai, *The Tamils 1800 Years Ago*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1979, p.114
- [10] K.Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, Oxford, 1968,p.11
- [11] N.Vanamamalai, *Material Thought in Early Tamil Literature*, *Social Scientist*, Nov.1973,pp.34-35
- [12] Bundla Ramasamy Naidoo, *Memories of the Internal Revenue System of the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1908,p.18
- [13] N.Karasima, *South Indian History and Society*, OUP,Delhi,1984,pp.31-40
- [14] L.B.Alayev, *The System of Land Rights in South India*, *Proceedings of 5th International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, Madurai, Jan,1981,pp.1-14
- [15] N.Vanamamalai, *Consolidation of Feudalism and Anti-Feudalism during Chola Imperialist Rule*, *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies*, Oct, 1977, Madras, Vol 2, pp.239-243.
- [16] Pazhamalai.T, *Dharmapuri Mannum Makkalum (Tamil)*, Dharmapuri, 2005, p.216.

- [17] Kalpanan.S.B, Viduthalai Porattathil Krishnagiri Mavattam (Tamil), Krishnagiri Maavatta Karutharangu Malar, 2009,p.123
- [18] Rajayyan.K, Endowment Lecture, Tamil Nadu History Congress, Tenth Session, Sri Pushpam College, Poondy, 10-10-2003.

