



The Vellalas as Peasant Proprietors in Medieval South India

Dr. Pragyan Choudhary

Associate Prof. & Head

Department of History

Digambar Jain PG College

ABSTARCT: *In their tradition the Vellalas are associated with the 'plough' and 'flood control,' and therefore, they have developed as a flourishing peasant community of the Tamil country. Despite their expertise in cultivation and water-harvesting, the Vellalas did not enjoy high ritual status in social hierarchy. The epigraphical records of Medieval South India indicate that the Vellalas gradually evolved out of their position as cultivating class and acquired the status of peasant proprietor. This study investigates the process of change and the eventual transformation of the Vellala community as an eminent landowning class of South India.*

KEYWORDS: Peasant, Vellala, Proprietor, Chittirameli, Ur, Brahmdeya, Mobility

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The Vellalas are well-known as a distinguished peasant community of Tamilnadu. The term, Vellala denotes "controller of floods" which is indicative of their command over floods and proficiency in water harvesting for agricultural purposes. Some of their traditions also shed light on their origins from a man carrying a plough who trained the people in tilling of the fields.¹ It is believed that when the ancient ruler, Karikal defeated the Aruvalar, he distributed the captured land among the Vellala chiefs.² According to Tolkappiyan, the Vellalas have no other identity than the cultivators of the soil.³ This study deals with the nature of the Vellalas' access to land and examines their position as peasant proprietors. It is necessary to find out their activities as a cultivating group and to what extent they were the masters of their fields and actual landowners. The study of the nature and degrees of such control over land may indicate the extent of their contribution to agricultural production. The focal point of this exercise is to look into the nature of their landholdings and the degrees of their rights and authority over the lands under cultivation.

MAIN TEXT: Agricultural land is a sign of social prestige and power. The ownership of land by a farming community indicates not just material prosperity but also delineates the social status and standing in the contemporary society. In medieval society, a large number of people belonging to various farming communities were contesting to gain more and more control over cultivable land in order to obtain social and economic eminence. Being a prominent peasant community, the Vellalas were an integral part of this phenomenon, i.e. the scramble for agricultural land in this region. A good deal of epigraphic evidence is available which clearly shows the pattern of the rights and control over the agricultural land by the Vellala community.

A large number of inscriptions record the land donations by the Vellalas to the temples. This phenomenon would also reveal the diverse nature of their landholdings. An inscription from Sivapuri⁴ (823 CE) refers to a donation of land by Tuvarapati-Velan for the kitchen expenditures of the Svayamprakasa temple. Another inscription,⁵ belonging to the reign of Chola king Rajarajadeva I, registers a gift of land for burning of two lamps in Uttarapatisvara temple in Tanjore district by a Vellala. These inscriptions are a good source of information regarding individual landownership of the Vellala community and their land donations to temples. However, gifts of land were also made by the Vellala peasants in their collective strength. An inscription (dated 1274 CE),⁶ from Salem district, reports that a land was gifted by several Mudalis (Vellalas).⁷ A gift of land as gurudakshina was made to a teacher, Srikanthadeva by the six Vellalas.⁸ This reference is unique as it is a voluntary gift of land from the Vellala students to their teaching community. This also signifies the increasing ability of the Vellala community to make gifts of land both in religious and secular areas.

Several inscriptions refer to gifts of land made by the corporate organization of the Vellalas, particularly Ur and *Chittirameli*, the corporate assemblies of the Vellala peasantry and non-brahmins. Ur was the assembly of the non-*brahmadeya* villages.⁹ If the village belonged to Vellan landlords with the necessary classes, it had the assembly of the Ur.¹⁰ However, *Chittirameli*, implying 'a beautiful plough', was a supra-local organization of the peasants, with cordial relations with the assemblies of merchants and artisans.¹¹ An inscription from Ramnad district, records that the tank and fields to the north of Tirukkalakkudi-Nayanar form the devadana *Sittirameli* nallur.¹² This reference shows the nature of *Chittirameli* assembly to make gifts of agricultural land and water tanks to the temples.

An inscription from Anaimalai (Coimbatore) informs that during the reign of Kongu Pandya, the Ur assembly of Vadakkilur confirmed the land donation and granted 30 kalams of paddy for each year for food offering.¹³ In this case, the assembly is not donating land but rather stamping its seal of confirmation on some pending donation. In the same village, a gift of land was made by Ur and Sabha assemblies for burning a lamp in the temple.¹⁴ The joint gift of land by sabha and Ur assemblies is significant as it underlines coordination and social acceptability between the Vellala landlords and the Brahmin landlords during the Chola period.

Some specific gifts of land were made to the temples for preparation of festivals, worship, and feeding of Brahmins. A 13th century inscription from Coimbatore tells us about a gift of land made by the assemblies of Vallanadu and Puluvanadu of Vadaparicaranadu for the festival during the month of *cittirai*.¹⁵ A 14th century record refers to the gift of land by the nadu assembly of Vadaparicaranadu for the gopura of the temple at Thiruvarangam during festive worship.¹⁶ A 15th century inscription from Coimbatore district registers a gift of a reclaimed village by Ur assembly to the temple for feeding Brahmins.¹⁷

During the reign of Kulottunga III, a Sanskrit-Tamil inscription (1197 CE) from Nellore records that the *periyavishayam* met at the *chittirameli-vinnagar* (Vishnu temple) at Nellore and contributed some land in each village in the area to the temple.¹⁸ However, *periyavishayam* is the synonym of *periyannadu*. It may be noted that the Vellalas were responsible for the emergence of *periyannadu* during 11th eleventh century.¹⁹ During this period, *Chittirameli* also saw enlargement in size and activities and therefore began to find reference as *Chittirameli-periyannadu*.²⁰ During the period of Rajaraja III, an inscriptional record (1235 CE), from Tiruchirappalli states that *Chittirameli-periyannadu* and *Ainnurruvar* met in a large assembly and made a tax-free gift of a village to a Buddhist temple.²¹ This record throws light on a joint social agreement among the peasants' and merchants' organization, and particularly on social harmony between the Vellalas and merchants.

The Kalpalayam inscription²² (1242 CE) from Tiruchirappalli, records that *Chittirameli-periyannadu* resettled a ruined temple-village (*devadana*) in Tiruppidavur-nadu and donated it as tax-free to a Vishnu temple at Kuruvatti. This is an important instance of procuring of rights in land by reclamation of wasteland or resettlement of ruined village by Vellala assembly. This is a significant proof of the authority of *Chittirameli-periyannadu* regarding remission of taxes and declaration of tax free villages. The process of acquiring rights in land by reclamation of wasteland was well established both in Kongumandalam and Cholamandalam and such rights were claimed by the Vellala community both at the individual and organizational levels.

Some of the inscriptions specify the sale and purchase of lands by the Vellalas in this period. A village assembly sold the rights of a village (Nayakkankuppam) to seven members of the Vellala community and a merchant for 380 panam (gold coin) each in Chingleput.²³ This record signifies the purchasing power of the Vellala farmers and their ability to enter a deal along with rich merchants. A Kanchipuram inscription, dated 1365 CE shows that few housing structures were sold to Mudalis (Vellalas) at the rate of 150 panas by the priests of Raja-Simhavarmesvara temple.²⁴ By the end of the Chola period, on account of their wealth and resources, the Vellalas had risen as important dealers and buyers of landed property.

The inscriptions also provide information about selling of land by the Vellalas or their assembly. Two Vellala peasants caste are said to have sold land to a man in North Arcot in 1287 CE.²⁵ An inscription from Coimbatore records the sale of agricultural land by Ur assembly to an individual merchant during the 13th century.²⁶ Another 14th century inscription from Coimbatore records a commercial transfer of land by a Vellala to the local merchants.²⁷ Similarly, another inscription of 14th century refers to the sale of an orchard by Siruvan Andan (Vellala) to the temple of Alagapperumal at the rate of 300 *pullikuligai panam*.²⁸ This record is an unmistakable proof of the nature of investment and the growing commercial spirit among the Vellala peasantry.

During 14th century, an inscription found at Perur (Coimbatore) registered the commercial transaction of land between two Ur assemblies, i.e. of Perur and Kumilai respectively.²⁹ The commercial sale of land by one Ur assembly to another is a good example of the economic strength of the non-*brahmadeya* cultivators, particularly Vellalas. The information gleaned from these inscriptions clearly shows that the Vellala peasantry had transformed into a class of peasant proprietors with legitimate rights of selling and buying land at will.

Inscriptional evidence about possession of land and grants of rights by the Vellala peasants had also been found. An inscription from Aduturai records an agreement among the 98 castes each of the Valangai and Idangai against the Brahmins and the Vellalas, who enjoyed proprietary rights (*kani*) over the agricultural lands in Trichinappalli.³⁰ Another inscription from Tanjore (1478 CE), refers to the grant of *Kaniyatchi* rights over lands situated in Nagarmangalam by Karukatta-Vellalar.³¹ The terms '*kani*' and '*kaniyatchi*' have been explained

by various scholars.³² *Kani* stands for hereditary right of possession to land along with the office and position.³³ On the other hand, *Kaniyatchi* implies grant of the right to ownership of land or village.³⁴ The grant of *kaniyatchi* rights by the Vellalas sheds light on their privileges in carrying out transfer of land and rights in land. It is significant to view the social existence of the Vellalas above the right-hand and left-hand castes, which triggered the envy of the dual divisions against the Vellalas and Brahmins.

It has been argued that the Vellalas demonstrated considerable advancement in their power and position at the expense of the Brahmins in the Kaveri valley.³⁵ The Vellalar ambitions to socialeminece vis-à-vis Brahmins can be gleaned from two 13th century inscriptions, found in Thanjavur district in 1288 CE. These inscriptions state that the *nattavar* (*nattar*) of five *perilamai-nadus* held a gathering along with the *sabhaiyar* and *maha-sabhaiyar* of Rajdhiraja-chaturvedimangalam (a Brahmin village) for the purpose of settlement regarding the payment of taxes in their villages to the government.³⁶ The content of the two inscriptions from Mannargudi appears to be a regulation of the relations of the Vellala tenant-cultivators and Brahmin landlords. But the necessity of this exercise indicate a social crisis confronted by Brahmin landlords in retaining their superiority vis-à-vis Vellala tenant-cultivators in this particular region.³⁷

Karashima also throws light on an interesting phenomenon in the late Chola period when the private landholding receives momentum and a spate of land transfers takes place between individuals or between individuals and temples.³⁸ However, the Brahmins were found to be under severe constraints—either selling some of their holdings or taking measures to protect their lands from the encroachments of the newly rising landed communities.³⁹ In terms of land acquisition, the Vellalas appear to be one of the chief beneficiaries of the newly emerging agrarian order in the thirteenth century.

The acquisition of landed property by the Vellalas suggests variations in the existing peasant society. According to R.S. Sharma, differentiation in South Indian peasantry and villages is amply proved by two perceptible facts, i.e. the presence of the Vellalas as substantial farmers, and the frequent occurrence of the term ‘Vetti’ (bonded labour) in Chola⁴⁰ and Pandya land charters which may signify the lowest agricultural stratum engaged in ploughing for a meagre living.⁴¹ The existence of these two classes reveal a range of graded intermediaries such as assignee, occupant, sub-occupant and cultivating tenant⁴² in a landed hierarchy, created by a system of land grants. Burton Stein has also talked about ‘dominant peasantry’ and ‘dependent peasantry’ in medieval southern society, which also indicates differentiation in terms of power and status within the agrarian structure.⁴³

II. CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it is obvious that the Vellalas were a dynamic community of peasants who aspired for a respectable position in the contemporary social hierarchy. The social and economic power of the land presented a new opening to the Vellala people towards social and economic ascendancy. During the eleventh century, the Vellalas’ attempts to take control of the lands they used to cultivate can be seen as a first major step in the direction of mobility. They increased their efforts to establish control over land in the Kongu region and the Kaveri valley where a substantial population of the Vellala peasants existed. From the latter half of the eleventh century, we see an impressive process of change in their conditions when they shift from the status of cultivator to that of landholders. Being a peasant community, they drew considerable economic strength from their control over their lands and the surplus produce of their fields. The newly acquired economic power aggravated their desire for higher ritual status and higher degrees of social command and control. Eventually, the Vellalas succeeded in controlling and possessing vast tracts of cultivable land, and transforming their social and economic position as substantial peasant proprietors and landlords.

¹ Edgar Thurston & K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of South India*, vol. VII, p. 362.

² *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

⁴ *South Indian Inscriptions*, (Madras, 1890),xiv, 218; [*Annual Reports on (South Indian) Epigraphy*, (Madras, 1887) 1929, 66].

⁵ *ARE*, 1913, 56.

⁶ *ARE*, 1900, 29.

⁷ Thurston, *op. cit.*, vol. 5, p. 84.

⁸ *ARE*, 1900, 31.

⁹ N. Karashima, *South Indian History and Society*, Delhi, 1984, p.1.

¹⁰ *Epigraphia Indica*, 1939-40, 11, vol. XXV.

¹¹ Karashima, *op. cit.*, p. 36; Karashima & Subbarayalu, ‘The Emergence of the *Periyannadu* Assembly in South India during the Chola and Pandyan Periods’, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, I, 1 (2004), p. 89.

¹² *ARE*, 1916, 116.

¹³ *Coimbatore District Inscriptions*, 2004, 184.

- ¹⁴ *CDI*, 2004, 197.
- ¹⁵ *CDI*, 2003, 860.
- ¹⁶ *CDI*, 2003, 856.
- ¹⁷ *CDI*, 2003, 212.
- ¹⁸ *SII*, V, 496; Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 92.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93; *SII*, viii, p. 198.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94; *Avanam*, 2, pp. 58-60.
- ²³ *ARE*, 1921-22, 230.
- ²⁴ *SII*, 1890, 87.
- ²⁵ *ARE*, 1945-46, 67.
- ²⁶ *CDI*, 2003, 962.
- ²⁷ *CDI*, 2003, 849.
- ²⁸ *CDI*, 2003, 851.
- ²⁹ *CDI*, 2004, 103.
- ³⁰ *ARE*, 1913, 34.
- ³¹ *ARE*, 1945-46, 12.
- ³² Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Textiles and Weavers in South India*, Delhi, 1985, p. 50 [The term *kani* appears to have been a generic term derived from the root *kan* meaning 'to see' or 'to mark,' which, in association with other terms, meant different things in different contexts. *Kani* in modern terminology means an area of land measuring 100 *kuli* (0.33 acres)].
- ³³ Karashima & Subbarayalu, 'Kaniyalar old and new: Landholding policy of the Chola state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', *IESHR*, 44, 1, 2007, p.3 n7.
- ³⁴ N. Karashima, 1984, p. xxxi.
- ³⁵ Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 90.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Karashima, 1984, p. 31.
- ³⁹ Karashima & Subbarayalu, 2004, p. 90.
- ⁴⁰ P. Shanmugam, *The Revenue System of the Cholas, 850-1279*, Madras, 1987, p. 16. Cited R.S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society – A Study in Feudalisation*, Kolkata, 2003, p. 31.
- ⁴¹ R.S. Sharma, 2003, p. 31.
- ⁴² R. Tirumalai, *Land Grants and Agrarian Reaction*, p. 16. Cited Sharma, 2003, p. 31.
- ⁴³ Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, 1985, p. 42.