

**Tamil Social Formation
in Sri Lanka :
A Historical Outline**



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Front : Dolmen, a megalithic burial monument found at Katiraiveli, Eastern Province. In the South Asian context, the megalithic culture was essentially a South Indian development, denoted by various types of burial monuments, introduction of iron technology, tank irrigated agriculture, permanent settlements and a pottery technique that produced Black and Red Wares. The urbanization, earliest kingdoms, chieftaincies and the refinement of the language that produced Cankam Tamil literature in South India, were in fact the culmination of this culture. Recent studies point out that the Island of Sri Lanka was also a part of this milieu. In the Jaffna Peninsula alone, three megalithic sites have been so far identified and excavated at Kantarotai Anaikkottai and Karainagar.

Back : A traditional drummer of Karainagar, Jaffna. The drummers are one of the ancient communities in the formation of Tamil society in Sri Lanka. Besides playing drums at funerals and folk temples, they had a role in the society as heralds and traditional weavers. They maintained the family records of their feudal lords and even practised medicine and astrology. In Jaffna, they still retain a dialect of their own, which has a number of proto-Dravidian and a few Prakrit words, not found in any other dialects of Tamil.

Back inside : Cluster of *stupas* at Kantarotai, Jaffna — a Buddhicized version of megalithism. The structures are recent reconstructions by the Sri Lanka Department of Archaeology on the original bases.

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Historiography : a Re-appraisal

Writing the history of the Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka as a separate entity has a tradition of at least 500 years, beginning with the historiographical works like *Vaiyāpāṭal* and *Kailāya-mālai*. Prior to that period, the conventional sources — the Buddhist chronicles on which the authoritative history of the Island is still based — are not much helpful to understand the Tamil history. History is basically the capacity of a society in remembering its past. The mode of exerting this capacity differs from society to society. Hence, one must devise appropriate tools to reconstruct the history of a particular society. Saying that a particular society has no history, without going for an appropriate tool, as in the context of the Tamils, is a crime committed on that society, which is what that is being done by the Sri Lankan historians. Therefore, now we have to mainly turn towards the tools like archaeology, cultural anthropology, folk studies, historical linguistics etc., to understand the history of the Tamil society.

South Asia and Sri Lanka

Geologically, geographically and environmentally, the Island of Sri Lanka is a part and parcel of the South Asian sub-continent. The cultures — both Sinhala and Tamil — that emerged in Sri Lanka fall within the South Asian frame and particularly within the South Indian frame because of proximity.

The development of Sinhala-Buddhist culture and the Tamil culture in Sri Lanka are parallel and identical with the development of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam cultures in South India. One can even cite a common stratum for these developments. Unfortunately, due to various reasons, a comparative study of these South Indian and Sri Lankan phenomena has not been even attempted.

Pre and Protohistoric Antecedents

The human habitation in Sri Lanka began with the prehistoric microlithic people who possibly migrated through a land bridge then existed from the South eastern coast of the present Tamilnadu. The earliest evidence of this culture in the Sri Lankan context has been now dated back to 28,000 B.C. The next wave of migration and cultural impact were marked by the megalithic phase in protohistoric times, which was also essentially of a South Indian cultural stratum. These pre and protohistoric antecedents were an extension of the sequence that took place in the extreme peninsular India. By the dawn of history, during the time of Asoka, Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka as a cultural inspiration. This was the period when for

the first time South Asia came under an imperial unity and Sri Lanka acknowledged it.

Ethnic Structure in Sri Lanka — Myth and Realities

There are no racial differences among Sinhalese, Tamils and the people of South India. But, around 6th Century A.D., the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka imagined a mass Aryan migration during protohistoric times, which they thought was the basis for the formation of the Sinhala-Buddhist society. This myth created in response to the then prevailing situation is unfortunately still the foundation for the authoritative history of the Island, conditioning the minds of the people. In reality, there were no objective evidences for an Aryan migration. The ethnic structure in Sri Lanka is quite South Indian with close affinities to Tamilnadu and Kerala. Sinhala and Tamil cultures derived from a common stem. Hence, the definition of ethnic differences seriously needs a fresh interpretation in the Sri Lankan context.

First Settlements in Jaffna — the Megalithic Culture

C. 500-100 B.C.

Archaeological evidences reveal that the first people of Jaffna belonged to the megalithic culture, which is undoubtedly a South Indian phenomenon of Iron Age. Emerging in around 500 B.C., the first settlers had a multifaceted subsistence of incipient farming, lagoon exploitation and cattle herding. They communicated in a language that can be termed proto-dravidian, were non-Buddhists practising a folk religion similar to that of the Cankam Tamil country and on the whole, were of a common stock of the protohistoric South India. Tamil and

Pali literatures of the early centuries of the Christian era mention them as *Nākās* and their land as *Nāka nāṭu* or *Nāga dīpa*.

Trans-oceanic Trade, Urbanization and the Resultant Emergence of a Principality in Jaffna

C. 100 B.C.-C. 500 A.D.

The trans-oceanic trade that developed around the beginning of the Christian era had an important impact on Jaffna. Kantarōṭai in Jaffna was urbanized from the megalithic basis, parallel to Anuradhapura and Mahāgama in the Southern Sri Lanka; and parallel to Koṟkai, Kāvērippattinam, Arikamedu and other Cankam cities in the ancient Tamil country. Jaffna emerged as a principality with Kantarōṭai as its central place. This phenomenon survived to C. 5th century A.D. till the decline of the Roman trade.

An aspect of this phase was the overlapping of Buddhism with the megalithic beliefs. Further discussion on the Buddhist monuments in Jaffna is necessary, as they are often misinterpreted and misused by the Buddhist chauvinists in Sri Lanka and much dreaded by and antagonistic to the common man in Jaffna. During the early centuries of the Christian era, Buddhism was fairly a popular ideology in Tamil South India too. *Maṇimēkalai*, a post-Cankam Tamil Buddhist work mentions Jaffna as a Buddhist sacred place — *Maṇi-nāka-tīvu* or *Maṇi-pallavam* — testifying the popularity of Buddhism in Jaffna.

These Buddhist remains of Jaffna are unique in their concept and execution. They are highly localised and constructed

entirely with the locally available coral and limestone. At Kantarōṭai they appear in clusters at a particular spot. They seem to be burial monuments of monks, a Buddhicised version of megalithism. Such a concept in architecture and its execution in coral and limestone, significantly differentiates the Jaffna monuments from those in the rest of the Island. Hence, we prefer to call this architectural expression as Jaffna Buddhism. The monuments explain how at that time the socio-economic and cultural conditions in Jaffna were able to adapt the Buddhist faith and were able to articulate it in their own way. Buddhism was an integral part of the cultural heritage of Jaffna.

The Sinhala-Buddhist Identity in the perspectives of South Indian Regional Developments

6th - 10th Century A.D.

The latter half of the first millennium A.D. witnessed the emergence of regional dynasties and regional cultural variations attaining definable forms in South India and Sri Lanka. Concurrent to the development of Kannada, Telugu and Tamil dynasties and cultures, the Sinhala-Buddhist and Tamil patterns developed in Sri Lanka. This was the time when Sinhala became an identifiable language; Buddhism was intertwined with statecraft; and the tank-irrigated agriculture attained its full development. In contrast, the Tamil country in India was facing a Brahmanic revival, Bhakthi movement and the extinction of Jainism and Buddhism. Also, the growing powers like the Pallavas and the Pandiyas often intervened in the Sri Lankan politics. Such a background was the underlying current to the formation of Sinhala-Buddhist identity and to its antagonism

and resistance to the Tamil culture. The Pali chronicles, *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa* were an outcome of such tendencies.

Ironically, in this age of regional developments and identities, Jaffna played a very insignificant role. This was due to the fact that the Roman trade which elevated Jaffna to a principality declined around 6th century A.D., and that, hydraulic developments in the more hospitable regions in the dry zone Sri Lanka and in South India made Jaffna a poor competitor. The Tamil-Saivite evidences of this period mainly come from Māntai (Mannār District) and from Trincomalee. Jaffna was alternately absorbed into the centripetal forces that were working in the dry zone Sri Lanka and in South India.

South Indian and Sri Lankan Polity, the Cōla Empire and the Emergence of the Kingdom of Jaffna

10th - 13th Century A.D.

The rulers of the ancient Tamil country often fought with the rulers of Sri Lanka in a similar way they fought among themselves. On many occasions, adventurous South Indian chieftains and princes conquered Sri Lanka, but ruled as Sri Lankan Kings. This pattern continued to late medieval times till the advent of the British. The last King of Kandy was neither Tamil nor Sinhalese but of Telugu origin — a survivor of the legacy of the Vijayanagar empire. Apart from these dynastic conflicts, the Cōla empire was the most influential factor in formulating the Tamil homeland. By the beginning of this millennium, from a powerful basis of hydraulic developments, the Cōla empire emerged in South India. Trade aspirations, particularly gaining

control over the trans-oceanic Arab-Chinese trade inevitably activated the maritime expeditions of the empire. Sri Lanka faced its first colonial experience under the Cōḷas. The dry-zone of Sri Lanka and its hydraulic pattern declined. The capital Anuradhapura was abandoned. Mass migrations took place which considerably changed the demography of the North and the East of the Island. In Jaffna, Kantarōṭai was replaced by Nallūr. As a sequence of these developments, the kingdom of Jaffna emerged in the latter half of the 13th Century A.D. when both the Sinhalese and South Indian hegemony declined. In short, a Tamil strain in Jaffna which was far anterior going back to protohistoric times was given a fresh impetus by the Cōḷa empire in carving out a homeland of specific dimensions for the Tamils in the north and the east.

The Kingdom of Jaffna — Direct Predecessor to the Concept of Tamil Homeland

The kingdom of Jaffna is the direct predecessor to the present day concept of Tamil homeland. The kingdom was Tamil-Saivite and its demographical extensions were well illustrated in the Jaffna-centric historiographical literatures which arose in these times. The demography according to these literatures cover a territory from Kutiraimalai in the west coast (Puttaḷam district) to Verukal in the eastern coast (eastern province) encompassing more or less the present northern and eastern provinces. The kingdom was dominated by clans and feudal chieftains who had migrated from the various parts of South India, especially from Tamilnadu. On many occasions, new settlements were created by them. The kingdom was partially agrarian and partially mercantile. A kingdom exclusively for

the Tamil homeland became thus possible only when there were no big powers in southern Sri Lanka and in the Tamil South India. The political reality when the Portuguese came to Sri Lanka was that there were three kingdoms i.e., the Kingdom of Kōṭṭe, Kandy and Jaffna.

Tamil Settlements in the Vanni Districts, Eastern Province and in the Northwest

10th - 16th Century A.D.

The Cōḷa empire and the subsequent developments had a great impact on the demography of Vanni, East and Northwest. Especially the East was in the limelight under the Cōḷas, probably due to their activities in the Bay of Bengal. Tamil inscriptions of this and subsequent periods are found concentrated in the East upto Tirukkōyil in the down south. Mass migrations of clans were a common phenomenon in the Vijayanagar South India, and their impact was felt in Sri Lanka too. Vanni, East and the Northwest have their own literary records narrating the settlements that arose in this period. The settlers ranged from agriculturists to traders, artisans, mercenaries and fisher folk. The indirect impact of the Vijayanagar empire prevented the political advent of Islam. But, since the early centuries of this millennium, Muslim settlements came up in the coastal areas known for maritime trade contacts. In the Tamil homeland now they are a considerable population in Mannār, Maṭṭakkaḷappu, Jaffna city and Puttaḷam in the Northwest (which was part of the Tamil homeland till recent decades). The language of the Muslims in Sri Lanka whether in the Tamil homeland or in the rest of Sri Lanka is Tamil. They either migrated from the

Coromandel coast and the coastal areas of the Gulf of Mannār, Malabar etc., or were natives converted to Islam.

The Portuguese and Dutch Periods — Jaffna Centric Socio-economic Developments

16th - 18th Century A.D.

The Portuguese and Dutch maintained the kingdom of Jaffna as a separate unit. Jaffna witnessed considerable economic growth under the Dutch due to certain specialized industries and trade. This paved a way to the Jaffna-centric social and cultural developments in subsequent times. Towards the end of the Dutch rule, religious and linguistic revival took place which created a place for Jaffna not only to lead the Tamil homeland but also to be in a position ahead of the then Tamil South India in certain spheres of cultural achievements.

The Decline of Economic Independence

The late British period witnessed a gradual decline of economic independence of the Tamil homeland, especially Jaffna. The economy became more and more dependent on the plantations and on the Colombo-centric economic developments that took place in the Southern Sri Lanka. Traditional subsistence, trading ports and trade routes declined. Missionary and native education brought in white collar jobs. The traditional trade which was cut off from its South Indian contact turned towards the Sinhalese areas in the south creating subsistence competitions. The image of the Tamils as exploiters and the resultant ethnic conflict arose in the early decades of this century with the emergence of the powerful force of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism.

The Personality of the Tamil Homeland in Sri Lanka

The Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka is characterized by a contiguous territory of a specific environment. It has a demography of a homogenous linguistic people who have specific subsistence patterns and who are conscious of their ethnic identity formulated over several centuries. The social formation of this territory has its own dimensions distinct from that of Tamilnadu and southern Sri Lanka. Though they call themselves as Tamils, they shouldn't be identified with the people of Tamilnadu. Their social and cultural formations should be viewed only as a parallel development to that of Tamil South India.

Tamil Homeland — Its Place in the South Asian Pattern

If one goes for a South Asian framework, the Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka may be looked upon as a regional variation. But, the prevailing political and economic conditions have made it an exerting question of Tamil nationalism, demanding a separate nation. Struggling and achieving a separate political identity; remaining as a regional variation within Sri Lanka; militarily or otherwise establishing the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism; affiliating with India; these are some of the current options envisaged officially or unofficially in the power circles and among the common people.

It is a historical fact that the Tamil social formation in Sri Lanka over several centuries played a buffer between the Sinhalese and South Indian social formations. History also points out that it was the subsistence pattern that had determined the place, status and geo-political affinities of this social formation.

The present crisis is essentially one of devising socio-political means which will ensure a subsistence pattern for these people in their own land. A separate nation, autonomous State, unitary system and affiliation with India are mere words in the absence of the incorporation of this fundamental factor.

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