CHAPTER II

GEOGRAPHY OF THANJAVUR
The Thanjavur region, the boundaries of which have already been defined in the previous chapter, constitutes largely of the present districts of Tiruchirapalli, Thanjavur, parts of Pudukottai and South Arcot. This area may roughly correspond to the territory known in Chōla times as Chōlamandalam. The frontiers of Chōlamandalam, as mentioned in an ancient work, may be stated thus: the sea on the east, river Vellār on the South, Kōṭṭaikarai on the West, and the river Peṇṇār on the north. (Map No.1...)

Unlike the other regions of Tamil Nadu, the geographical structure of the region under study is very simple. This vast plain is considered as an important deltaic region, sloping gently from the west towards the sea on the east. The land also slopes pleasantly towards the southeast and the flow of the tributaries of the river Kāviri is greatly conditioned by this phenomenon and takes a winding course towards the great salt-pan of Tiruthuraiṇḍi. Towards the west it rises to a height of about 500 feet.

The geological structure of this delta region is composed of rich alluvium, of a varying composition, resting on very ancient rocks of doubtful origin. In the western part the

1. The Geology and Geography of Thanjavur area, discussed in this chapter are mostly derived from the Gazetteers of the Districts of Tanjore, Trichinopoly and South Arcot, unless otherwise referred to.
alluvium is rich loam. It gradually shades off into the 'blown sands' of the coast. They are all of recent aqueous origin.

**Terrain:**

Though the entire Thanjavur region seems to offer a monotonous geographical pattern of plains unrelieved by hills or forests it is possible to recognise minor variations here and there. As one proceeds from the east to the west, one can notice the upland tracts of Thanjavur, Thannarkudi and Pudukkottai taluks lying south and south-west of this region. The Vallam table-land reaching to a height of about 160 feet to 180 feet above mean sea level lies to the south and south-west of Thanjavur. The lateritic rock at Vallam and Kandharvakottai, can be used for construction of buildings and as road-metal while the sandstones available at Vallam can also be similarly used. Quartz occurs near Vallam and is called the "Vallam Diamonds". Gneissic rocks available in the neighbourhood have been used for the construction of temples and massive public buildings. Certain types of these rocks are well suited for fine carvings in temples.

In the west and north, a clear departure from this area can be noticed. The Kolli Hills and the isolated hillocks

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near Vridheeschalan and Fudukrottai relieve the region from being a vast plain. The rock beds at Tiruchirappalli town wherein a Fort was erected at a later date, remind us of the beginning of a rocky terrain to its west.

In the Southeast corner of the district the large Vedaranyam swamp lies between Koçikkara on the south (Point Calimere) and Adiarpatnam on the north. This swamp is subject to erosion from time to time and receives a layer of the salt due to evaporation of sea water.

The Thanjavur region, though devoid of hills and plateaus has yet a pleasing aspect which attracts people from different lands. The forest area in Thanjavur region is very small and limited. The reserved of the district do not yield valuable timber. Supply of firewood is from the Udayarpalayam area situated on the western periphery of this region. The green and fertile fields of the district offer a happy landscape contrasting with those lying outside this region. Here where nature’s blessings are plentiful temples, which are famous centres of art and sculpture abound. There is an aura of peace and tranquility attracting devotees and connoisseurs of art and culture.

River Systems:

One of the most important factors that contribute to Thanjavur being a cultural centre is the river Kāviri. It starts in the hills at Coorg, flows through the highlands of Karnataka, running down to the plains at Sivasamudram and enters Tamil Nadu to traverse the Salem, Coimbatore and Tiruchirapalli districts, and finally flows into the district of Thanjavur, making it the granary of South India. Kāviri runs no more than about 500 miles and at no point is it more than a couple of furlongs in width. It is usually dry during the summer months of the year, and this is specially so after the construction of Mettur Dam (1925-34). Even when its flow is full, in the recent memory of man it has not burst its banks to inflict devastation. This blessing was not only because of Karikalan’s engineering feat but also of numerous irrigation channels branching off from the river Kāviri which absorb most of the waters. It is noteworthy that very little of the waters of this river is wasted. Its entire course spreads fertility on both sides of the banks.

The people here who sanctify rivers as divine affectionately worship this river as Mother Kāviri. The Kāviri deserves this devotion in no small measure, for she is a careless traveller, shedding her treasures as she goes along in the shape of the silt she brings down from the mountain to the
valleys.\(^5\) Legendary and sacred origins are attributed to her. Scholars have found the meaning of the word Kaviri as 'that which grows gardens' (Kāviri).\(^6\) A few others have explained the term as garden and lake (Kāviri).\(^7\) In either case it is a Tamil word, though the term Kaviri is often used along with Sanskrit expressions. Ptolemy knows it as 'Cheberis' and the Seriphus 'Kamara'.\(^8\) It is also called 'Ponni', a poetic epithet which suggests that it 'carries grains of gold at its bottom'.\(^9\) 'Pon' of course is another name for paddy and so the Kaviri, the great producer of paddy, is 'Ponni'. The Goddess of wealth herself is Ponni. The river has not changed its course significantly through history. This has been amply testified by the observations of the archaeologists who have carried out excavations at Tirukkāmpuliyūr and Alagarai.


9. Pattinapprālai, line 7
situated on both the banks of Kāviri. The deviation in its course, estimated to be not more than 1½ furlongs near Kuttālān (near Nāyavaram), is indeed a notable feature. Probably even this deviation occurred only in the last century.

At the point of reaching Tiruchirapalli the river forks into the northern Kollidam and the southern Kāviri. The northern arm merely serves as a drain to carry off its surplus waters. The Grand Anicut, an engineering strategy, keeps the two arms apart. Once Kāviri enters Thanjavur, it branches off into smaller streams. These rivulets of the Kāviri narrow down considerably due to the numerous diversions after Tiruchirapalli and appear as a mere stream near Nāyavaram when it reaches the sea north of Tārāṅgānāḍī as a streamlet. The river also drips down in the plains. There are numerous branches which drain the waters of this river before it reaches the sea. The following may be considered as its important branches:— the Vāḍavār, the Vennār, the Vettār, the Kudāmaruṭṭi, the Uppanār, the Manikēndnār, the Arasīlār, the Mahimālayār, the Vāṇjiār, the Tirumalairājanār, the Mudikondanār, the Manjai-vaikkāl, the Vīrachōḷan and the Pāmuṇṇaiyār. Most of these streamlets are really no more than irrigation channels and serve such a purpose. It was essential for the continuation of the fertility of the delta that the waters of the river Kāviri should not get diverted into the Kollidam (Coleroon). Attempts to conserve the waters from the Kāviri were not successful. Silt of the river could not be combated and so a
decrease in the acreage under cultivation has become inevitable.

The Kāvīrī and her branches have made the delta rich with alluvial soil. A small tract of land between Veṭṭār and Veṇṇār has a mixture of alluvial soil and limestone. The fertility of the delta depends almost entirely on the rich silt brought down by this river. The long narrow belt between the Kolliad (Coleroon) and the Kāvīrī from the head of the delta down to Kumbakōṇam contains the richest alluvium of the delta and is aptly known as the 'breast of Thanjavur'\(^{10}\). The soil is so rich that the use of manure is rare, except, in the case of lands under double cultivation. The richest alluvium lies in the middle of the delta where are seen the rice fields of Thanjavur. The fertility of the country decreases as the coast is reached, since the silt deposited is scattered and ridges and hillocks of blown sand fringe all along the coast.

Monsoons and Rainfall:

South Indian life, specially on the Coromandel coast, is very much dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon. This can make or mar the happiness of the peasant and indirectly the whole country. It is axiomatic that on the prosperity

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\(^{10}\) K. Ramamurthy, 'Some aspects of the Regional Geography of Tamil Nad, in I.G.J , Vol. 23, No.4, 1948, p. 32.
of the peasant depend the fortunes of the rest. The unpredictable nature of the monsoon may lead to floods and consequent inundation or drought leading to destruction. The monsoon by its very nature of unpredictability and by its capacity to cause damage has made the average resident there a fatalist. He has lost his faith in his capacity to plan his material comforts and looks up to a distant providence to provide him with periodical rains. Another ravage of nature which has made the peasant helpless and despondent is the cyclone which occurs all along the Coromandel coast from Nellore through Nagapattinam to Rameswaram. Despite these conditions, the rainfall and climate in general have made Thanjavur as one of the most enviable and best rice fields in the world. More than 74% of the land in the region is irrigated. These lands have been described as "an interminable sea of green and golden rice fields dotted by village and surrounded by palm leaves".

The fertility of the soil is replenished year after year by the silt and the rich alluvium deposited by the floods of the river. But this fertility of the soil depends on its distance from the river; the nearer, the more fertile.

11. Economic Geography, Vol. 9, 1933, p.41
Paddy is the major crop and dominates every other on the coastal plains. The increasing population of the delta area has necessitated the cultivation of the food crop under ideal conditions. The chief varieties of paddy cultivated here are the Kar and the Campa. The latter, being finer, commands a high price. The staple crop is grown on about 5/7th of the cultivated area. Sugarcane and betel-vine are the other crops grown here. A dry crop is sometimes grown as a supplementary to a wet crop on irrigated lands. But there seems to have been little attempt to rotate the crops due to the fertility of the soil. There is very little of cash crop cultivation except in some isolated pockets like Vallam, where cotton is grown. Among the dry crops, groundnut and millets like karbu are significant. Groundnut and gingelly, besides coconut, are produced in the drier soil tracts of the district. Green crops like onion, radish, sweet potato etc., are also cultivated as garden crops. Tobacco cultivation is known but is restricted to limited areas on the river margins. In the sandy tract at the southeastern end of the district near Koçikkarai it is grown in plenty. Being a principal article of trade, it is a remunerative commercial crop. Plantain cultivation is yet another major agricultural occupation and is important for its greater monetary value.

The first census of the Thanjavur district was taken as far back as 1922\(^\text{13}\). This was followed by surveys based on actual enumeration. In 1921 the total population was reckoned at 2,130,383. A gradual decline in population is seen in 1921 due to the economic depression consequent on the post war conditions.\(^\text{14}\) From the census figures obtained in the later part of the 19th century it may be inferred that this part of the country was fairly thickly populated. There is no means of determining the population of Thanjavur area for the pre-British period.

**Industry and Trade**

The dominance of agricultural pursuits has turned industry to a lower key. Industry presupposes the availability in the neighbourhood of raw materials other than food products. These being largely absent, Thanjavur could not develop into an industrial area. Paddy milling and sugarcane crushing are ancillary industries to agriculture. Carpentry and masonry are largely associated with building of temples. Goldsmithy and brassware manufacture in Kumbakonam depend on traditional local skills and a market based on the leisured well-to-do agricultural community. A very specialised industry around

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Thanjavur town is the making of sophisticated musical instruments like the Viha (lute) and the Tambura (the drone) etc., characteristic of South Indian culture. This industry owes its popularity to the time honoured tradition of music in this locality; this is the home of the trinity of carnatic music—Tyagaraja, Suthusamy Rikshithar and Shyama Sastri. The natural deposits of salt around Adirampattam has made the manufacture of salt an important, though, localised industry.

Yet another small industry of the place is salting the fish. It will be seen that except for the textiles wherein the manufacturing skill is local, the raw material is mostly imported. Except the food grains, particularly rice, there is not other major commodity which can be exported through the eastern ports. Special mention may be made of Nagapattinam functioning as an exporting port. It may be noted however, that there were many more smaller ports which could have served as no more than intra-coastal marine traffic ports. Though there are a few minor ports like Nagapattinam, Tanjore and Cuddalore, the lack of major ports has hindered the growth of a vital industry like ship-building.

The number of major highways were few. One such must have been the road from Kaveripumpatnam to Srirangam described in the great Tamil classic Silappathikaram as the route taken by the epic hero Kovalam and his illustrious wife Kannagi. It is not surprising that the present railway line from Sirkali
(the nearest point to Kaveripattinam) to Tiruchi (via Thanjavur, Kumbakonam and Thanjavur) takes practically the same route. Thanjavur, the heart of this region, and Nagapattinam the chief port, must have been directly connected by a road largely used by merchants and to-day a railway line links the two points directly. The network of railway lines within the district has compensated by making up in inland trade for what it lost in export trade. In the early days exports through the Thanjavur ports must have reached Ceylon, in its first lap, and Malaysia and Burma later. The Nagarathars of Chettinad who are Hindus and the karakkayars who are Muslims monopolise most of the trade. The Vellalas who produce rice and other food grains deal exclusively in the sale of such commodities. The cattle, though large in number, do not yield enough milk to justify a dairy industry. Thanjavur is not a pastoral country, and hence the breeding of cattle is rare. Bullocks of good bread are imported from places like Mysore in Karnataka and Salem in Tamil Nadu.

Influence of Geography:

The influence of geography, particularly on the ecological aspect, customs and manners and in fact the whole way of life

of the people, cannot be exaggerated. The present day technological aids and devices which help the modern man to control floods and arrest soil erosion etc., were unknown to the people of Kannur till recent times. The environmental changes have only a marginal impact on people which the general dictum regarding the influence of geography on human life. Noted historical thinkers like Montesquieu have emphasised this fact, which has to be conceded when one considers the cultural life of a people who have lived in a region over a very long period of time.

The geographical features have played their role in the development of a certain special type of culture here which may be taken to represent a compromise between the brahminical and non-brahminical cultural features. The emergence of this blended type of culture has also determined the nature of the polity. The numerous temples which were liberally endowed by royal patrons, the high standard of education that prevailed in this area and the large number of brahminical agharaema which fostered education argue in favour of a semi-sacred polity. In such an atmosphere it is only natural for the priestly community to have obtained special privileges to follow their traditional pursuits.

The life of the people is made pleasant generally speaking subject to the rigours of tropical summer, by the climate being
on the whole healthy. "As the delta widens the increased breadth of the irrigated land causes more rapid evaporation of the water with which it is covered and hence the country is colder towards the sea.....Wallam is the healthiest and the coolest part of the district.......The area upto Point Calimere is however swampy. That promontory was at one time considered a sanatorium but it is now said to be material." 15.