CHAPTER II

PEOPLE OF TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT: THEIR HISTORY AND CULTURE

The Archaeological Studies have shown that Tirunelveli is a "Cultural old city". The Tirunelveli district takes its name from the city of Tirunelveli, which was known in the past as Thenpandyanaagaraam. In the antiquity, the town was a bamboo forest and hence it was known in those days as Venuvanam. The name Tirunelveli is derived from the combination of Tiru (beautiful) Nel (paddy) and Veli (hedge). According to the Sthalapurana (history of the sacred places) Venuvanam came to be called Tirunelveli (sacred paddy hedge) on account of a miracle performed by Lord Siva by protecting the paddy of a devotee from rains by himself forming a hedge around it (Nelveli). With the addition of an honorific adjunct "Tiru" to "Nelveli" the town came to be known as Tirunveli. (இரு+ பெள் + வலி ) In the common parlance of English, it was called Tinnevelly and was used as such by the colonial governments in their records and documents.

Literature

There is a reference about Tirunelveli in the Sangam literature. In the *Devaram* hymns generally ascribed to 7th century A.D., there are references about Tirunelveli. Thirugnanasambandar’s versification of the presiding deity of the town could be seen in ...

**Boundaries**

The erstwhile Tirunelveli district lies in the north eastern extremity of the Indian Peninsula. It is roughly triangular in shape. The district is surrounded by the Gulf of Mannar on the east and south, by the Kerala State. It is situated between 8.45° and 9.45° of the northern latitude, and 77.20° and 78.20° of the eastern longitude. It is 120 miles long from north to south and 75 miles wide from east to west near the Madurai frontier. The word "Tiru-Nel-Veli" (the

---

4 *Idem.*
7 *Idem.*
sacred paddy hedge)\(^9\) therefore appropriately refers to the paddy fields which surround this district.\(^10\) The climate may be said to be equable. The temperature ranges between a maximum of 108 °F and minimum of 80° F.\(^11\)

**Rivers**

The river Tambraparani the precious jewel of Tinnevelly, rises from the Agastiar hills\(^12\) in the Pothigai ranges in the Western ghats and passes like a green winding ribbon through Ambasamudram, Tirunelveli, Srivaikuntam and Tiruchendur taluks irrigating the fertile lands all along.\(^13\) Chittar, Manimuthar and Vaippar are some of the other important streams of the district.\(^14\)

**The Tamiraparani**

Spelt differently as "Ampraparani", "Tamraparni", and "Tamiravaruni" the river is mentioned as the Porunainathi in Tamil poetic literature. It gets recognition and referred to as a renowned one

---


\(^12\) *Ibid.*, pp.132-133.


in Sanskrit literature too which are as old as that of the *Puranas* and epics.\textsuperscript{15}

The meaning and origin of the name Tamiraparani is reasoned out differently. Bishop R.Caldwell, in his book, *A History of Tinnevelly* discussed the various interpretations of the word "Tamiraparani" at length. According to him, the meaning of the name "Tamiiraparani" in itself is sufficiently clear, but its application in this connection is far from being self-evident. "Tamara" means, red, *parani* means *parana* a tree which has leaves. "Tamaraparani" might, therefore, mean a tree with red leaves.

Some scholars interpret the name "Tamiraparani" as "Tamiram" (copper) + "Varuni" (Stream or river). They ascribe this origin as the bed of the river is of red soil when the water flows on the red soil it gives a copper like appearance. The Greeks of the Ptolemy's time refer to this river as Solemn.\textsuperscript{16}

**Origin**

The Tamiraparani originates from the peak of the Periya Pothigai hills of the Western ghats above Papanasam in the Ambasamudram taluk. The great river like the Cauvery but unlike most of the other Indian rivers, is fed by both the monsoons the south

\textsuperscript{15} R.Bishop Caldwell, *A History of Tinnevelly*, New Delhi, 1982, p.55

west and the north-eastern and seen in full spate twice a year if the monsoons do not fail.\textsuperscript{17}

The Tirunelveli \textit{Sthalapurana} associates the origin of the river with sage Agasthiyar. It dwells that when Agasthiyar was requested by Lord Siva to move to the South, Parvathi Devi, the divine consort of Siva filled the sage's meant to hold water for \textit{pujas} with the water from Ganges and on his arrival at Pothigai, he released it and the water ran as Tamiraparani.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Mountain and Teris}

The Western Ghats border on the west of the Sankarankoil, Tenkasi and Ambasamudram taluks while a portion of them is situated on the western and southern part of Nanguneri taluk also. In the taluks of Tiruchendur, Srivaikuntam and (at present in V.O.C. District) Nanguneri, there are wind swept and dunes that at times look like small hillocks. The wide sea-shore is filled partly with pure white sand and partly with a peculiar red soil piled up in great dunes known as Teris.\textsuperscript{19} The Teri culture is noteworthy in the areas adjoining the Nazareth and Meignanapuram. The vast water

\begin{flushright}\textsuperscript{17} M.Alagarsamy Pillai, \textit{op.cit.}, p.195. \\
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, p.200. \\
\textsuperscript{19} F.J.Western, \textit{The Early History of the Tinnevelly Church}, London, 1950, p.11. \end{flushright}
resources known as *taruvais* in these sand dune areas are judiciously tapped and utilised for cultivation. The region also abounds in palmyra palms.

The district is an open country where cotton is largely cultivated in black soil, though considerable extent of land could still be seen barren. The fertility of the black soil has helped a rich cotton cultivation, leading thereby to economic prosperity of the region.

**Mammals**

The mountain range is covered with forests which shelter a good number of tigers and other wild beasts that sometimes make forays into the nearer parts of the plains.

**Birds**

The avi-fauna of the Western ghats of the district comprise most of the species of Indo-Chinese relics which have parallel closely related general in the north east Himalayan ranges. Some of the important species of birds are the Hill Myna, the Nilgiri whistling thrush, Fairy Blue Bird, the Malabar Great Pled Hornbill, the Racket tailed Drango, the Malabar Trogan, the Great Black Woodpecker and others. Other rare species of the hills are Pallavas Fishing Eagle, Pale harrier, Crested Serpent Eagle, Crested Hawk Eagle, Black Eagle,

---

21 F.J.Western, *op.cit.*, p.15.
Forest Eagle owl, Scopes Owl, Nilgiri Green Pigeon, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Blossom Healed parakeet, Hawk cuckoo and Scarlet Minivet. There are also certain migratory species of Warblers, Flower peckers and Flycatchers that are winter visitors of the ghats from North India, Eastern Europe and Africa.

There are a large number of birds found in the plains as of anywhere also in the peninsular India. Certain migratory non-aquatic birds are the paradise Flycatcher, Golden Oriole and Indian Pitta. Aquatic migratory birds from the northern regions of India as well as abroad are usually winter visitors to various ponds of the district, extending their stay up to May - June.

Mention must be made of some important villages where innumerable birds flock during winter and spring. They are: Koonthankulam, Ilamkulam, and Ariyakulam. Special credit goes to Koonthankulam and Ariyakulam, which are well protected by the villagers themselves and recently Koonthankulam has been made a bird sanctuary. A few important aquatic migratory species are the Grey Pelican, Painted Stork, lesser Flamingo, White Ibis, Glossy Ibis, Lesser Whistling teal, Garghany, spot billed Duck, Spoonbill, and Open billed Stork. Recently, Bargeaded Goose has been found to visit Tirunelveli district, which has been hitherto reported to have its southern most range upto Mysore. A few of these birds become
residents here itself when local conditions of water availability and food are satisfied even after June.

**Soil**

The fertility of the soil and a moderate rainfall, account for its rich vegetation. The district is overstocked with sheep and cattle.\textsuperscript{22}

Soil in the district may be classified into two varieties namely, red soil and black soil. The northern part of the district consists of the black loam and the southern part red loam.\textsuperscript{23} The black soil is of high value when compared to the red.\textsuperscript{24} Kovilpatti and portions of Sankarankoil and Srivaikuntam taluks on the north-eastern part of the district consist of black soil where cotton is grown extensively. The availability of cotton in abundance at a cheaper rate in the Tirunelveli district was utilised by the English East India Company and this led to economic exploitation.

**People**

The inhabitants of Tirunelveli may be divided into three caste groups - the Brahmins, high and low caste non-Brahmins and the outcastes.\textsuperscript{25} Next to the Brahmins, the Vellalas who are high caste

\textsuperscript{23} *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency*, op.cit., p.3.
\textsuperscript{24} S.Sundararajan, *op.cit.*, pp.72-73.
non-Brahmins, were of great influence.\textsuperscript{26} In medieval times they functioned as the chief advisors to the ruling families of Tirunelveli district. Next come the Maravas, who are a war-like community displaying valour and vigour.\textsuperscript{27} Pallans and Parayans are the outcaste communities.\textsuperscript{28} Once the Nadars were also considered to be untouchables and were termed as Shanars. Several of them became Christians to escape from the tyranny and stigma of caste.\textsuperscript{29} In the 19th century, due to the evangelistic works of the Christian missionaries, the lowest sections of Tirunelveli region were converted to Christianity.\textsuperscript{30} For, conversion, as the American historian Frykenberg observes, led to increasing education (literacy) and self-improvement or self-reform, the most positive social reform of all. Conversion also created in the converts a consciousness of social disability and injustice. This is turn led to social protest on the one hand and provoked social resistance and repression on the other.

Muslims are found in large numbers in the Tirunelveli, Tiruchendur, Tenkasi and Ambasamudram taluks. They belong to the

\textsuperscript{26} P.T.Srinivasa Iyengar, \textit{History of the Tamils}, New Delhi, 1982, p.72.
\textsuperscript{28} Edgar Thurston, \textit{Ethnographic Notes in Southern India}, Madras, 1907, pp.441-442.
\textsuperscript{29} Robert Hardgrave, \textit{op.cit.}, p.43.
Lebbai and the Marakayar groups and are mostly Tamil speaking traders.

The major caste groups - Brahmins, Vellalas, Maravas, Nadars and the outcastes constitute about eighty per cent of the total Hindu population of the Tirunelveli district. The remaining twenty per cent consists of very small groups of artisans (Kammalar), writers (Kanakkar), weavers (Kaikolar) potters (Kusavar), barbers (Ambattar), washer man (Vannar) and others. Muslims and Paravas represent two minority groups.

**Important Temples**

Temples are the mainstay and back-bone of religion. The Tirunelveli District is blessed with several reputed temples of legendary, historical, architectural and artistic importance. Legendary importance goes to the temples at Tirunelveli, Alwar Thirunagari, Krishnapuram, Tiruchendur, Sankarankoil, Tenkasi, Courtallam and Nanguneri.\(^ {31} \) All the temples attract a large number of tourists throughout the year. In the Tirunelveli District, there are a few rare shrines which one cannot see elsewhere in Tamil Nadu.

Nellaiappar Temple at Tirunelveli, Adinathaswamy temple at Alwar Tirunagari, Srivaikuntanatha temple at Srivaikuntam, Thotadirinatha temple at Nanguneri, Subramania temple at

---

Tiruchendur, Venkatachalapathy temple at Krishnapuram, Papanaseswarar temple at Papanasam are the important temples of the District.\footnote{Idem.}

**Important Festivals**

The people of Tirunelveli District celebrate a number of festivals throughout the year. The most important festival is *Pongal*. It is a three-day festival commencing on the last day of *Margasira* (January). The first day is called 'Bhogi Pandigai'. It is observed by all the Hindus of this district. The second day is the holy 'pongal'. The third day is known as 'Mattu pongal' and 'Siruvittu Pongal'. The horns of the cows and bulls are painted and strings of coconuts and fruits and garlands of flowers hung on them.

*Navarathri* is another famous festival celebrated in this district during the last week of October. This festival is celebrated in the temples especially at Kulasekarapattinam and Tuticorin, where the 'dussehra' is celebrated with all religious fervor.

*Deepavali* is the most important festival and is observed by the people of all classes high and low, rich and poor. It is celebrated in the month of October - November, the anniversary of the day on which Sri Krishna destroyed the cruel demon Narakasura who ruled the earth and greatly oppressed the people.
**Vaikunta Ekadasi** is another famous festival being celebrated in the Nava Tirupathis\(^{33}\) by the Vaishnavites. Apart from the above festivals, the people also celebrate the **Chithrapournami** festival, **Adi Tabasu** festival in Sankarankoil, **Adi Amavasai** festival in Sorimuthu Aiyankoil at Karayar, **Avani** and **Markazhi** festival in Tiruchendur.

## Important Mosques

Melapalayam Mosque, the mosques at Kayalpattinam, Pottalpudur Mosque, the mosque at Athankarai Pallivasal are some of the important mosques in Tirunelveli district. The 'Kanduri Festival' in Pottalpudur mosque draws a large number of devotees from all religions.

## Historical Significance

Pearl fishery in the Tirunelveli coast was a great source of revenue to the Pandyan Kingdom.\(^ {34}\) The sea-faring Tamils of the Tirunelveli coast were much more able-bodied and athletic than the ordinary people.\(^ {35}\) Pliny in his notes says that the pearls were mainly imported into the Roman Empire from the Indian Ocean Coastal areas. Pearl was called by the Romans as **Union** meaning unique

---

\(^{33}\) **Nava-Tiruppatis**: Nine Vishnu temples situated on either side of River Tambraparani. They are Alwar Thirunagari, Erattai Tiruppathi (two temples), Nattam, Perunkulam, Srivaikuntam, Thenthirupperai, Thirupulinkudi and Tirukalur.

\(^{34}\) **Chilappathikaram**, XXVII, p.127.

gem, as no two pearls are alike in size, shape, polish and weight.\textsuperscript{36}

Korkai was the headquarters of the Pandya country which carried on a lucrative pearl trade with the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{37}

Historical references clearly indicate that the pearl fishery in the Tirunelveli coast accounted for a flourishing lucrative trade with the west and the Far East.\textsuperscript{38} The Gulf of Mannar has been one of the most important strategic spots on the coast of Coromandal. From very early times in South Indian history, the Gulf of Mannar had been a centre of brisk commercial, political and religious activities, involving in this many-faceted enterprise, people from far and wide.\textsuperscript{39}

For many centuries, the Gulf of Mannar region had been a sort of entrepot, and a cultural melting pot, from where a flourishing seaborne trade in spices, pearls and silken and cotton goods, teak and sandalwood, rice, ivory, indigo, metals and several interesting items had been carried on, bringing in turn a huge profit to the country.\textsuperscript{40} In the pre-independence era, it was an important centre for the

\textsuperscript{36} S.Arunachalam, \textit{The History of the Pearl Fishery of the Tamil Coast}, Annamalai Nagar, 1982, p.40.

\textsuperscript{37} C.Rasanayagam Mudaliar, \textit{Ancient Jaffna}, New Delhi, 1984, pp.100-101.


\textsuperscript{39} Romila Thapar, \textit{A History of India}, Vol.I, Baltimore, 1917, p.149.

\textsuperscript{40} S.Manickam, \textit{Studies in Missionary History: Reflections on a Culture-Contact}, Madras, 1988, pp.2-7.
commercial, religious and political activities of the Dutch, Portuguese and the English.

Tirunelveli is also renowned for academic excellence. Nammalvar, a native of Alwar Thirunagari in the Tirunelveli district was one of the twelve Vaishnavite Saints (Alwars) who composed the *Nalayira divya prabandham* (The Four Thousand Hymns). Umaru Pulavar, a Muslim by religion and a native of Ettayapuram in the Tirunelveli district was the author of the Islamic Epic *Sirapuranam*. Fr. Beschi, a Catholic Missionary popularly known as Viramamunivar has also done remarkable services in the Kamanayakkanpatti Mission. He is credited with the famous Christian Epic called *Tembavani,* composed in highly sophisticated Tamil. Fascinated by the poetic beauty of *Tiruvacasam,* G.U.Pope of the Society for the propagation of Gospel (S.P.G.) Missionary in Tirunelveli, has translated it into English. His services in the Sawyerpuram Mission are remarkable.

H.R.Krishna Pillai, a native of Reddiarpatti in Tirunelveli district, was the author of *Ratchanya Yatriham* adopted from John Banyan's *Pilgrim's Progress.* K.A.Nilakanta Satri, a renowned historian who has made immense contribution to the South Indian Historical Scholarship, was a native of Kallidaikurichi, a small town in Tirunelveli District. Another great son of the soil was Rao
Bahadur Vaiyapuri Pillai, who edited and brought out the first Tamil Lexicon. With a definite aim to impart education to all, Christian Missionaries of both Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches have established colleges in the Tirunelveli district. St. Xavier's College and St. John's college at Palayamkottai in the Tirunelveli District have been serving as institutions of higher learning. Palayamkottai is even now acclaimed as the 'Oxford of South India'.

In the 20th century, Tirunelveli became the birthplace of militant Tamil nationalism and hotbed of extremist politics. Subramania Bharathi, who was the native of Ettayapuram in the Tirunelveli District played a dynamic role in the Indian National Movement. His myriad poems kindled the patriotic fervor and richly contributed to Tamil national awakening. V.O. Chidambaram Pillai another great patriot of Ottapidaram in the Tirunelveli district was a militant nationalist and a strong disciple of Bala Gangadhar Tilak. He founded the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company, which operated ferry services from Tuticorin to Colombo, in spite of threats freely held out by the British Imperialism. Vanchi Nathan, the hero of Maniyatchi took up guns for the cause of India's freedom. His bullets put at rest the life of Ash, the Collector of Tirunelveli in a railway compartment at Maniyachi junction in 1911. V.V.S. Iyer, a veteran freedom fighter, founded a Gurukulam (Ashram) at Cheranmahadevi,
that was sponsored by the Indian National Congress. It is due to some administrative lapses, this Gurukulam had created a controversy of considerable importance. Thus the Tirunelveli District has been a place of historical significance.

**Tourist Attraction**

(i) **Mundanthurai Tiger Sanctuary**

The Tiger Sanctuary at Mundanthurai is prominent tourist attraction of the Tirunelveli District. It is located on the western Ghats at a distance of 53 kilometres on the western part of Tirunelveli. The sanctuary is famous for tigers and elephants. Besides tigers and elephants, other wild life can also be seen here. Thick forests and thrilling hill slopes provide the status of an international tourist centre to this place. A forest Guest House is also available here.

(ii) **Manjolai**

Manjolai, a hill resort is situated 57 kilometres away from Tirunelveli at an elevation of 1162.81 metres. There are many tea plantations in and around this place. Manjolai is noteworthy for its climate, scenery and calm atmosphere. This place can easily be compared with Ooty, the Queen of Hill Stations as far as the pleasing climate and peaceful natural atmosphere are concerned. Just above

---

41 V.Krishnaswamy, *Sutrula Valarchi* (Tamil), Chidambaram, 1986, p.179.
Manjolai, there are places like Kakkachi and Nalumukku which are real gifts of nature.

(iii) Moontradaippu

Moontradaippu is situated some 22 kilometres away from Tirunelveli on the way to Kanyakumari. The bird's sanctuary at Moontradaippu is internationally known. Birds from many countries come to this place from January to April every year. The natural conditions of this place attract birds from foreign countries. Bird watchers from several countries visit this popular place.

(iv) Koonthakulam

Koonthakulam is located 38 kilometres away from Tirunelveli in the Nanguneri taluk. Koonthakulam has been the sweet home for many domestic and foreign migrating birds for a long time. These rare birds find a paradise in the big tank there and they normally live for about six months from December to June every year. About 35 species of birds visit this calm and congenial village for breeding. With a large number of attractive birds, mainly Grey Pelicans. Plans are also there to promote Koonthakulam soon into an international birds sanctuary in Tirunelveli District.

---

42 Idem.
(v) **Uppar Kodaiyar**

Uppar Kodaiyar is located on the southern most tip of western ghats bordering the Kerala State. It is a beautiful area where nature is at its best around the year. Kuthiravetti, Oothu are important locales where one can have beautiful panoramic view. A mini golf course is also available here. The verdant forests of Uppar Kodaiyar are capable of promoting adventure tourism.

(vi) **Ariyakulam Bird's Sanctuary**

Ariyakulam Bird's Sanctuary is situated 13 kilometres away from Tirunelveli. A variety of birds congregate at Ariyakulam in large numbers from March to June every year for breeding. They come from different parts of the world. The river and the tank here attract birds from far away places also.

(vii) **Kalakkad Sanctuary**

Kalakkad is situated 47 kilometres away from Tirunelveli. The wildlife sanctuary at Kalakkad is located on the Western Ghats. This has been declared as Lion-tailed Macaque Sanctuary. The rare animal is found only in one place in India - Kalakkad. Bison, elephant, and many other animals are found here. This is a popular tourist attraction.

Thus, Tirunelveli is one of the important districts of Tamil Nadu, having been endowed with ideal geographical location, topography, climate hillocks, forests, beautiful plains sanctuaries, temples and rich heritage. Significantly resources district which is making strides in various spheres of social development. The people of Tirunelveli enjoy their cultural heritage with all their history traditions and beliefs.

---