CHAPTER 3
ORIGINS AND SPATIAL SPREAD
OF THE TAMIL VEḷḷĀḷAS

The emergence of the Veḷḷāḷas in the Tamil country was a great paradox in Medieval South India, as this vibrant peasant community, in close conformity to the norms of economic and political power, rose to ascendency, but at the social and ritual plane, it amazingly failed to obtain legitimacy and the sacred mandate.

This section deals with the spatial context of the study. Before attempting an investigation of the Veḷḷāḷas, it is important to locate the problem at hand in its geo-historical perspective. The Veḷḷāḷas are not a homogeneous entity but belong to distinct territorial divisions each with its own cultural characteristics, namely Chōliya, Toṇḍaimanḍala, Pāṇḍya, and Koṅgu, each reflecting the geo-historical settings to which it belongs. As mentioned earlier, in the initial stage, Koṅgu Veḷḷāḷas were chosen as the chief representative of mobility and change among this community. But, gradually it became obvious that in order to have a scientific understanding of this community, it is essential to integrate the patterns of change in the Kāverī valley. Hence, the Choliya Veḷḷāḷas were also included in the study. It may also be noted that this study has also taken into consideration significant changes occurring in other parts of the Tamil country. However, our main consideration is to delineate the regional characteristics of the Koṅgu region and Chōlamanḍalam in order to justify the choice of these regions as a viable unit of study.
Map 6: Chōla Macro Region c. CE 1300: Territorial Divisions of Tamil Veḷḷāḷas

Source: Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*  
New Delhi, 1985, p. 286.
SECTION A
THE REGION AND ORIGINS

Origin of the term ‘Kongu’:

The term ‘Kongu’ has received the attention of a wide range of scholars. The Tamil lexicon provides three meanings to the term ‘Kongu’—pollen of the flower, honey and fragrance. All of these are applicable to the country it denoted. Since the lexicon suggests both ‘honey’ and ‘mathu’ as meaning of the term, it gradually came into literary usage as ‘alcohol’. Taking the cue from this derivation, some scholars suggested that since Kongudesam comprised plenty of low caste people like Vedar, who would have made abundant use of toddy, their country was designated as ‘Kongu’. This definition seems to have been naively conceived as firstly, a country with rich historical traditions could not simply have been a land of toddy-drinkers, and secondly the term ‘mathu’ which was derived from Sanskrit came into usage in South India long after ‘Kongu’ became prevalent. The Sangam poem, Patriruppattu gives a more reasonable clue when it refers to a Chera king as ‘Narrari naravir kongar-ko’ (the king of the Kongar famous for their honey). It indicates that the name ‘Kongu’ originated from the abundance of honey for which the land was known. It may be noted that the Sangam poems also mention that the Kollimalai region in modern Salem district was famous for its honey. The physiognomic features of Kongu country, particularly the variety of its mountains and stretches of forests, growing flowers and supplying honey in profusion, further

1 Kongu Country, p. 2.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 3.
support this view. However, we need to stretch a bit further to shed more light on the origin of the term ‘Koṅgu.’

V. Ramamurthy⁶ holds a slightly different opinion on this matter. He draws our attention to the practice among the ancient Tamils of wearing garlands of distinct flowers, grown in their respective regions, as a mark of identification. On the strength of these traditions, we may presume that the ancient people of Mysore region wore garlands of Kongam flowers (*Cochlo spermum Gossypium*). Some evidences may be cited to substantiate this argument. In praise of Nannan, the Velir chief of the Coorg and Mysore region, a Sangam verse refers to him as ‘Ponnam-kanni Nannan.’ As the colour of the Kongam flowers is yellow or golden, the term ‘Ponnam-kanni’ may be interpreted as the beautiful garland of the gold like yellow Kongam flowers. A verse of Perumkadai of Koṅguvel refers to a yellow cloth exactly like the flowers worn by the Kongars. It is obvious from the evidence that the people of Southern Mysore used to wear garlands of Kongam flowers and on this account, they were called Kongars. This argument derives further sustenance from the flora of the Mysore region. Kongam trees usually grow in the dry and rain shadow region of higher altitudes. The Bargur and the north Coimbatore plateau and the outer slopes of the Bargur ranges are plentiful in Kongam or Kongilavan trees that are found only in higher altitudes (above 3000 feet). Another variety of Konagm trees, VellakKoṅgu (*Amoora rohituka*) are also profusely found in the higher altitudes between 4,000 and 6000 feet of the Bargur ranges. It is believed that these forests provide grazing grounds to the pastoral people like Kongars. However, it may be pointed out that Marudam land derived its name from the Marudam trees (*Terminalia*

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arjuna) that have enormous growth in that particular area. In light of these, it would not be inappropriate to give credence to this view that the origin of the term ‘Koṅgu’ has strong linkage with the Kongam trees.

The Koṅgu Region:

The Koṅgu region is treated here as a distinct composite region made up of different geographical, socio-economic and cultural components. However, the definition of its distinctive elements or components which serve to mark a separate identity to Koṅgu is fraught with difficulties.

The Sangam literature refers to the Koṅgu country as a separate unit, but Koṅgu is not even mentioned in earlier works like Tolkappiyam. In its classification of different divisions of ancient Tamilakam, the author refers to thirteen nāḍus but Koṅgu is not referred to. Even in later period, it is uncertain as to when the Koṅgu region was demarcated as a separate state.

A tradition, mentioned in the Coimbatore Manual, says that after obtaining independent status, the boundaries of this region were delimited at a joint meeting of the Cera, Colā and the Pandya at Madhukarai near Kulitalai which then became the junction for all the kingdoms of South India. At that time, an earthen rampart was constructed from Madhukarai running northeast across the Cauvery to the Kollimalai in Salem and south-west to Palani. Remnants of this boundary which was known as ‘Koṅgukarai’ still

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Map 7: River Systems of Chōlamandalam, Tonḍaimandalam and parts of Koṅgumandalam

exist along the region demarcated above. On the west of Coimbatore, another place Madhukarai was marked as the boundary between the Cera country and the Kongu. Though this tradition records a very late event, we have no other evidence citing earlier delimitation of the Kongu borders.

From the period of the Ratta rule in Kongunad the existence of Kongu as a separate kingdom with well-defined boundaries was an established fact. The Kongudesarajakkal, a seventeenth century Mss. narrating the early history of the Kongudesam, refers to Colâ, Pandya and Kerala as surrounding Kongu and Karnataka during the Ratta rule in the Kongu region. This testifies the existence of Kongu as a separate mandalam or state during the Ratta rule in Kongu, i.e. first centuries of the Christian era. The boundaries of Kongu were separated from the surrounding kingdoms of the Colâ, Pandya and Kerala and its capital was Skandapura. The kings of Kongu were independent and often declared war against the three great kings of ancient Tamilakam. Kongudesarajakkal refers to the last Ratta ruler, Tiruvikrama in a passage: “(He) overcame the Colâ, Pandya, Kerala and Malayala countries and returned.” This makes amply clear that the affairs of these ancient kingdoms were not connected with Kongu until eighth century CE, when the first Pandyan victories in this region are reported and Sadaiyan Ranadhara (680-710 CE) is mentioned with the title, ‘Kongarkoman.’

Therefore, it is apparent that from the first centuries of the Christian era this region acquired distinguishing characteristics which constituted Kongu as a separate

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11 Ibid.
12 ARE, 1908, pt. 1, p. 18.
region. All through this period, Kongu retained its identity as a distinct spatial entity. In its full bloom of growth, Kongu comprised the whole district of Coimbatore, the Taluks of Omalur, Salem, Tiruchengodu and Namakkal in the modern district of Salem, a southern quarter of modern district of Dharampuri, Karur and a part of Kulitalai Taluk in the modern district of Tiruchirapalli and portions of Dindigul and Palani Taluks in the modern district of Madurai.¹³

In addition, three Tamil poems¹⁴, ascribed to the age of Tamil poet Kamban, delineate the limits of Kongu and help us to settle the problem of the area of Kongunad. The first poem clearly marks the boundaries of Kongu: North (Talaimalai), South (Vaikkavur (Palani), East (Kulitalai), and West (Vellimalai). The latter two poems appear to be redactions of the first one as they replace ‘Talamalai’ with ‘Perumpalai.’ Likewise, a poem in Kongumandalasadamakam¹⁵ also makes the same distinction. However, all these poems refer more or less to the same area, i.e., the borderline between Mysore and Kongu

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¹³ Arokiaswami, Kongu Country, p. 5; Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 13-14.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6,
   i) “Vadakku thalamalaiyam Vaikkavur therkku
      Kudakku Velli Poruppu kunru—Kilakkku
      Kulithandalai culum Kavericul nada
      Kulithandalai alavum Kongu.” (Anonymous)
   ii) “Vadakku Perumpalai Vaikkavur therkku
      Kudakku poruppu Velli kunru—Kilakkam
      Kulithandalai mevum Kaviricul nattu
      Kulithandalai alavum Kongu.”
   iii) “Vadakku Perumpalai Vaiyaru therkku
      Kudakku poruppu Velli Kunru-thadathil
      Kulithandalai alavum Kaviricul nada
      Kulithandalai alavum Kongu.”
¹⁵ Arokiaswami, Kongu Country, p. 6. “Mathirkarai Kiltisai therkum Palanimathi kudakku
   Kathithun Vellimalai perumpalaikaviyan vadakku
   Viidithun nankellai cula valamurru mevi Vinnor
   Mathithida valvuthalaithidu nil Kongumandalme.” (Kongumandal Satakam)
proper, Talamali separating the two in the modern district of Coimbatore, while Perumpalai divides them in Salem district.\textsuperscript{16}

However, certain historical writers often identified Cera with Kongu.\textsuperscript{17} It is an established fact that in their history Cera and Kongu regions retained their separate identities and had never been the same. The Cera King Senguttuvan is believed to have conquered the Kongu people at Sengalam.\textsuperscript{18} The Kosars are also referred to as the independent rulers of the Kongu country.\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, more evidence\textsuperscript{20} can be cited which militate against the identification of Cera with Kongu.

The notion of delineating Kongu country as a separate unit of study is also based on the understanding of the physiognomic features of the region. In other words, it can be argued that the topographical characteristics of this region provide a sound basis for treating Kongu as a distinct entity.

M. Arokiaswami describes those physical elements that can be neatly fitted together into a framework of a compact zone. 'Kongu region constitutes a compact area surrounded on all sides by mountains like the Shervaroys, the Kalrayans, the Kollimalais and the Pachamalais on the east, by the Talaimalai and the Bargur ranges and the Toppur hills on the north, by the Nilgiris, the Vellimalai and the Anaimalai on the west, and by the Anaimalai and the Palani hills on the south with altitudes varying from 3000 to 7000

\textsuperscript{16} Talaimalai is a place in the midst of a mountainous country in Gobichettipalayam Taluk of the district of Coimbatore, while Perumpalai is a village in the district of Salem close to the Toppur range. Cited Kongu Country, p. 7
\textsuperscript{17} See Wilson, Catalogue, p. 209; Hamilton Buchanan, A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar in 1800 (London, 1907), vol. ii, pp. 183, 200; Taylor, MJLS, xiv, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{18} Patirrappattu, v. Cited Kongu Country, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{19} Silppadikaram, Uraiperukatturai, para 2; Cited Kongu Country, p. 10.
feet. The only one considerable opening is towards the southeast and through it the Cauvery, the chief river of the Koṅgu region flows. The kingdom of Koṅgu seems to have been thus destined by nature to be an independent kingdom.\textsuperscript{21}

The kingdom of ancient Koṅgu can be located between 10.45\textdegree\textsuperscript{N} and 12.53\textdegree\textsuperscript{N} North Latitude and 76.50 and 78.53 East Longitude bounded by Mysore on the north by the North and South Arcot districts on the east, Trichinopoly, Madura and Travancore territory on the south and by Cochin, Malabar and the Nilgiri district on the west.\textsuperscript{22} The total area of Koṅgu country is approximately 15,300 sq. miles.

In the ancient times, the Koṅgu region was classified as a kurinji land (hill country). The validity of this classification arises primarily from the several mountains that surround Koṅgu and exist within the region. The Koṅgu country was renowned for its seven hills, Sivanmalai, Sennimalai, Aralimalai, Palanimalai, Vellimalai, Vattamalai and Kathithmalai. The hills and hill forts of Salem district provides a natural barrier against invading forces into Koṅgudesam.\textsuperscript{23} Walhouse reveals the mountainous character of Koṅgu by highlighting the fact that the tallest mountain ranges south of the Himalayas—the Nilgiri, the Palani and the Shervaroys—are found in the Koṅgu region, with the former bounding the great plain of Coimbatore on the north, the Palani within the Madura boundary separating Koṅgu from Madura, and the Shervaroys rising eastward in the Salem district.\textsuperscript{24} The lofty Anaimalais constitute another limit of the Koṅgu region.

\textsuperscript{21} Koṅgu Country, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{23} Salem Gazetteer, vol. i, pt. 1, p. 9. There is also a view that the very name ‘Salem’ by which the district is known is a corruption of the Sanskrit ‘sailam’, meaning mountain. Cited in Arokiaswami, Koṅgu Country, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{24} IA, III, p. 33. In Koṅgu Country, p. 15.
particularly on the Malabar side. Annamalai and Palni hills (along with Cardamom hills, south of Koṅgu) constitute the Western highlands between 8° 05' and 10° 30' north latitude. The Nilgiris, crowned by Dodabetta peak at 8,000 feet, rise to the north of the Palghat Gap and extend to 10° 40' north latitude where they descend to the Mysore plateau. The southern Mysore plateau is at about 2,000 feet and the Coimbatore plateau, which extends across the Kāvēri into Salem, at between 500 and 1,000 feet. However, the topography of Koṅgu region allows the southern Mysore plateau and the Coimbatore plateau to establish linkages with the Coromandel plain. The possibility of access to these uplands from the plain determined the course of Koṅgu history in considerable measure. From the agrarian point of view, the most beneficial factor of the Koṅgu geography is the formation of an agrarian core between the Western highlands and the Coromandel plain. The uplands of Coimbatore and southern Salem are surrounded by a range of broken hills such as Shevroy, Kollamalai and Pachamalai which reach the height between 2,000 and 4,000 feet. Other hills sought to divide sections of these uplands from each other. Baramahal. i.e., northern Salem is separated from its southern parts by very tough passes of considerable height (about 1,500 feet). However, important centres of the Koṅgu country have granted avenues to linkages with adjoining regions of the peninsular India. In this context, 'Coimbatore town occupies a strategic place on the trans-peninsular axis of the Kāvēri and Ponnani through the Palghat gap thus constituting one of the tenuous links between the Coromandel and the Malabar coasts.'26 On the other hand, northern Salem or Baramahal serve as a nodal area linking the 'eastern part of the

26 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
Karnataka heartland with the Coimbatore plateau on the south, and the coastal plain in the east. The historical significance of such slender and subtle geohistorical elements can be emphasized by the fact that they acted as channels of change and mobility, and to a considerable degree, determined the history of Kongu.

Kāvēri is the principal river of the Kongu region. It is regarded as an internal boundary between Coimbatore and southern Salem. The chief tributaries of Kāvēri in the Coimbatore district are the Noyal, the Bhavani and the Amravati; and its sub-tributaries are the Nilipallam, Vannathankarai, Nallaru, Siruvani, Paikari, Kallaru, Kuthiraiyam, Shanmuganati and Kulaganaru. The Salem district receives its share of water from the Vellar, the Vashista and Kāvēri, with the first two draining the region between the Kalroyan and the Kollimalais; while the Kāvēri runs along the western border of the district.

The river streams of Kongu have greatly influenced the settlement patterns in the region, particularly in terms of fertility, floods, riverine agriculture and density of population in the marudam tracts. Besides, the significance of the major rivers also lies in their unique dual functions i.e., of division and union. At one level, they have divided the portions of the Kongu uplands as we have seen in the case of Kāvēri. On the other hand, they have connected the uplands with more populated areas of the plain like Kāvēri linking uplands with the southern Coromandel plain.

A survey of the geological features of the Kongu region furnishes adequate evidence to map and classify the rocks exposed on the surface and those accessible.

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27 Ibid.
underground. V. Ramamurthy\textsuperscript{28} describes in detail the rock structure and its distribution in this region. In the Coimbatore district, all the rocks belong to the great gneissic series, the bottom rocks in the Indian rock series on which all other younger rocks are deposited, except the alluvia and a few aubarial formations. The rock formation in the Salem district is of gneiss or metamorphic series of the Crystalline Peninsular complex.

Kongu country was famous for its rich mineral wealth. Good quality of iron ore deposits are extensively found in the Kanjamalai, Goudamalai, Chitteri, Rasipuram, Namakkal, Valliampatti, forests of the Gopichettipalayam taluk near Hallogamalai and Chinnamalai\textsuperscript{29} and near Minkarai at the foot of Anamalai hills. Beryl or acquamarine is also a famous mineral of this region. Down from the Sangam period, Beryl was one of the chief sources of attraction for the Romans and others. Sangam literature mentions that 'the Kongars while grazing their cattle on the grasslands would obtain the glittering stones (Beryl) from the ground and the cavities of the rocks.' Beryl stones are abundantly found in Kodumanal (near Erode) and Punnaду (South Mysore). Ptolemy also reported that 'between Psedostomse (Mysore) and Beris (Bargur or Pariyur), there is Pounnatta, the country where the Beryl stones are obtained in plenty.'\textsuperscript{30} Obviously, the Pounnatta of Ptolemy corresponds to modern Punnaду of South Mysore. It has also been postulated by F.A. Nicholoson that this region was the chief supplier of Beryl in the ancient world.\textsuperscript{31}

Kongu is also renowned for its richness in gold deposits. Gold occurs in the Gopichettipalayam taluk. Numerous old workings have also been traced in the east.

\textsuperscript{28} Ramamurthy, op. cit., pp. 32-33.
\textsuperscript{29} MS Krishnan, \textit{Mineral Sources of Madras} (Madras, 1951), p. 96. Cited in Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{30} BP Saletoore, 'Roman Trade with Deccan', \textit{Proceedings of the Deccan History Conference}. First Hyderabad Session (Hyderabad, 1945). Cited in Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 34.
\textsuperscript{31} F.A Nicholoson, \textit{Manual of Coimbatore District} (1887), pp. 22-23.
north-east and south-west of Benisibetta Trignometric station. The wealth of gold of the Koṅgu region received serious attention of the ancient and medieval scholars. Verses of the Sangam literature mention that the Velirs of the ancient Koṅgu had deposited plenty of gold in a protected fortress. Koṅgu also received a good supply of gold in form of Roman gold coins that flowed into Koṅgu by the Roman traders. It may be noted that about two-third of the Roman gold coins were discovered in Coimbatore and in close proximity. It may be surmised that the abundance of gold in Koṅgu might have made Koṅgu a bone of contention between the ruling houses of South India. Koṅgu retained its glory of gold in the medieval times and it was suitably glorified in the medieval literature.

Koṅgu experiences four kinds of season: the dry season from January to March, the hot season during April and May, the monsoon season from June to September and from October to December. Koṅgu receives its first rains from the South-west monsoon which begins to pour through the Palghat Gap in the months of June and July. The rainfall of the South-west monsoon is irregular and unevenly distributed as the clouds are intercepted by the hills that border the region on South-west, West and North-west. On account of this erratic rainfall, droughts occur frequently in the months of July and August but Coimbatore taluk and Pollachi taluk which are opposite to the Palghat Gap

32 Ahananuru, verse 258 - 2.
33 Cited in Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 35.


are exception to this scenario. Kongu receives the second phase of rainfall from the North-east monsoon that sets in the month of October.

Kongu country can also be characterized as a composite region comprising diverse physical, social and cultural elements. Despite the fact that Kongu is recognized as a separate entity, one can easily identify sub-regions within the region itself which give it a compound character. The key to understanding of these components lies in the distinctive socio-economic milieu of the eco-system called the tinai.34 Pattupattu, a classical work of Tamil literature (third century CE) mentions these five tinais or physiographic divisions of Tamilakam, namely, kurinji (hilly areas), palai (dry areas), mullai (pastoral tracts), marutam (wetland) and neital (coastal littoral). This is a division of social groups in Tamil country into five situational types on the basis of natural sub-region and related occupational patterns.35 From the poetic elaborations such as hunting and gathering of the kurinji, plundering and cattle-lifting of the palai, animal husbandry and shifting agriculture of the mullai, wetland agriculture of the marutam and fishing-cum-salt manufacturing of the neital, one can speculate the forms of subsistence adopted by the people of the time.36 Apart from being spatial categories of Tamil subcultures, these fivefold divisions are also supported by the physiographical reality of the Tamil region. The tinais are widely scattered in the Tamil region as overlapping subdivisions.

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35 Stein, Peasant State, p. 55.

The complex geomorphologic character of the Koṅgu country, which was an important part of the larger Tamil region, influenced the pattern of settlement and prepared ground for the emergence of tinais. In the classical Tamil literature, Koṅgu region was treated as Kurinji (hilly area). According to Sangam literature, the earliest ruling families or ‘crowned kings’ (Vendar) emerged in the marutam tinais, representing the fertile agricultural tracts of the major river valleys. Some of the mullai (dry) tracts in the Koṅgu region, particularly in modern Coimbatore and Salem districts, were locations for important routes and thus became zones of contention among the Vendar. It is also evident that the Chōlas were the chief dominant power in the marutam tinais in the Kāvēri valley. The kurinji tinais (hill areas) were abundant in material resources which were in great demand outside the Tamil region. These constraints contributed to a symbiotic relationship between the kurinji, marutam and neital tracts, leading to a flow of the hill resources to marutam and neital, exchanged with paddy and salt. Apart from inter-tinais exchange, inter-tinais warfare was also adopted to acquire such resources. Hence, predatory raids were quite frequent and references to the destruction of crops and water tanks of the enemies prove that the kurunjis and mullais chiefs confronted the growing influence of the Vendar. Therefore, the uneven distribution of fertility and resources in the Koṅgu region promoted inter-tinais or sub-regional contacts in terms of exchange.

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37 Koṅgu Country, p. 12.
38 Champakkalakshmi, op. cit., 48
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
competition, hostility and warfare. The existence of social, cultural and ecological diversities within the region and the inter-relationship between the segments gave a unique composite personality to the Koṅgu region.

According to Brenda Beck, during the Cola period, the Koṅgu region came to be subdivided into twenty-four smaller units called natu and these latter into kiramams (revenue villages) and urs (hamlets). The Koṅgu Veḷḷālar leaders in the region traditionally spoke of local organization in terms of northern and southern halves, four boundary mountains, seven sacred centres, and other features. Consequently, these sub-units and sacred centres soon came to symbolize the region as a cultural and geographic whole.

Down from the ancient times, the sea has played a significant role in the life and activity over the coastal as well as interior areas of Tamil land. Koṅgu, which occupied the central position between the eastern and the western coasts, was highly exposed to sea influences from both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. The oceanic activities exercised a deep influence on the ecology, culture, society, polity and agrarian life of the Koṅgu region. The frequent cyclones and sea depressions affect the weather, particularly the north-east monsoon by causing heavy rainfall in the Kongu country. Some scholars also hold the opinion that the basic ethnic composition of South India might have been influenced by overseas immigration.

44 Beck, Perspectives on a Regional Culture (New Delhi, 1979), p. 86.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
However, the greatest impact of the sea can be observed in the field of maritime trade, which transformed the tribal society\textsuperscript{48} of the marudam tracts of the Kāvēri valley into a peasant society. However, the luxury goods such as elephants, horses, gold, gems etc. reached the hinterland and interiors like Koṅgu not directly through trade but through networks of kinship, reciprocity, patronage-clientele bond, redistribution and prestation.\textsuperscript{49} The kurinji and mullai tracts were indirectly brought into this commercial network through the marudam rulers.\textsuperscript{50} However, the chieftains of these tracts promoted the flow of prestigious exotic items in their territories in hope of attaining socio-political status.\textsuperscript{51} There is ample evidence to prove that Koṅgu was a beneficiary of the Roman trade in the first centuries of the Christian era. Though the Western contact with South India began on the west coast, it was mainly through Koṅgu that it penetrated the interior South.\textsuperscript{52} Roman gold coins in amazingly large numbers have been traced at Coimbatore. 522 Roman silver dinarii mainly of Tiberius and Augustus with a few of Caligual and Claudius were discovered at Vellalur near the modern town of Coimbatore in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{53} Other places that yielded Roman coins include Pollachi, Karur, and Kalayamuthur near Palani. These findings, documented in the Sewell’s ‘List of Antiquities,’ throw a great deal of light on the fact that Koṅgu region, particularly Coimbatore occupied central position in the ancient Roman trade with the Peninsular India.\textsuperscript{54} Arab and Chinese sources refer to trade relations of Koṅgu with Arabia and China during the Colā period. The Chinese work Chau-Tu-Kwa mentions sea-
going junks of Canton going as far west as Quilon\textsuperscript{55} on the Malabar coast; and also refers to Colā embassies sent to China by Rajaraja Colā and Rajendra Colā. Arab traded in horses with the Malabar coast and Koṅgu, being an adjoining region also participated in this activity. Koṅgu inscriptions also mention the term ‘Kudiraichetti’ which means ‘horse-trader’\textsuperscript{56}.

Because of its resources and geographical location, Koṅgu reaped the benefits of mercantile trade from both the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal.

**Community Traditions:**

Certain community traditions, composed during the medieval period, possess considerable information about some significant developments that occurred in the course of history of Koṅgu. In particular, these traditions refer to certain incidents and events related to the lives of Koṅgu kings, as well as socio-economic conditions of the times. The chief traditions of Koṅgu region are Koṅgudesarajakkal, Koṅgumandala Sathagam and Chōlapurvapataiyam.

*Koṅgudesarajakkal*, the celebrated Mackenzie Mss., is the greatest record for the history of Koṅgu region. Authored by an unknown scholar, it was probably compiled in the seventeenth century because it presents an account of the rulers of Koṅgu upto this period. This Tamil Mss. was translated and published by Taylor in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{57} *Koṅgudesarajakkal* provides an account of twenty-eight kings of early Koṅgu, including seven Ratta rulers, beginning from Viraraya Cakravarti to Vikramadeva; and


\textsuperscript{56} Arkiaswmai, op. cit., p. 285.

\textsuperscript{57} Taylor’s translation was published in MJLS’, vol. xiv in 1847. Cited in Koṅgu Country..., p. 22. However, an earlier translation of KDR was made for the India Office, London, based on which Dowson published an article in ‘Journal of Royal Asiatic Society’ in 1846.
twenty-one Gangā kings, from Konganivarman I to Malladeva II. Besides, it carries detailed references to the Chōla, Hoysala and Vijaynagar rule, as well as to the ruling dynasty of Mysore till the beginning of seventeenth century. This chronicle supplies graphic details of the Rattas and Gangās, particularly their administrative system, religious life and foreign policies; and elaborate description of the donations of the Hoyasals.

The historical significance of Korigudesarajakkal lies in its scientific and realistic composition and the prolific use of inscriptions by the author. While dealing with the Gangā rule, the author makes a point to corroborate the available date from the inscriptions and land grants. Lewis Rice says that “the utility of the Korigudesarajakkal is even greater than that of the inscriptions”, as is evident from details to which even inscription do not refer. Noticing the merits of Korigudesarajakkal, Taylor describes it as “one of the best in the whole Mackenzie collection, being free from fable and supported by dates.”

Korigudesarajakkal is reckoned as our chief chronicle which has bearing on the early history of the Koṅgu country. It is the foremost source of information regarding the identity of Koṅgu region. In its references to Chōla, Pandya and Kerala as surrounding Koṅgu and Karnataka during the Ratta rule, it provides adequate evidence of the existence of Koṅgu as a separate entity in the first centuries of the Christian era. It tells us that Skandapura was the capital of Koṅgu, and its kings were independent and

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58 Koṅgu Country, p. 23.
61 Taylor, op. cit., p. 3.
62 Koṅgu Country, p. 4.
frequently fought with the three great kings of ancient *Tamilakam*. Referring to the last Ratta ruler, Tiruvikrama, it says:

“(He) overcame the Chōla, Pandya, Kerela and Malyala countries and returned.”

The author of *Korigudesarajakkal* begins the history of Koṅgu with the Rattas because this dynasty exercised complete control over the Koṅgu region.

“In the history of kings in the Cali-yuga the first name inscribed is that of Vira raya Chakravarti of the Retti tribe, who ruled in the town of Scanda in the Congu country.”

The chronicle sheds valuable light on the remarkable event—the ‘Kalabhra interregnum’ that had long-lasting impact on the early history of South India:

“Then a Kali king named Kalabhra took possession of the extensive earth driving away numberless adhirajas (ancient kings).”

Besides this, *Korigudesarajakkal* also provides significant information regarding socio-cultural and religious conditions of the time. It gives evidence indicating Jain predominance in Koṅgu during the Gangā rule.

“The Jain Achariya, Naganandi instructed kings in the religious system of the Jainas.”

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63 Ibid., p. 5.
64 Ibid., p. 81.
65 Ibid., p. 84.
66 Ibid., p. 105.
In context of the Chōla king, Parantaka, the chronicle refers to information of considerable social significance:

"Acquiring great fame in the world and building an agrahara called Viranarayanapuram on the bank of Cauvery he gave free endowments to the Brahmins in it and also free endowments to the agraharas."\(^{67}\)

Parantaka is known to have covered the temple of Chidambaram with gold. In this context, *Koṟīgudesarajakkal* gives indication of Koṅgu being a chief supplier of gold when it records a unique tradition current in the Koṅgu region during the 17th century:

"He (parantaka) being one day in (or on) the sea heard the sound as of beating of the *mathalam* (a kind of long drum) and considering whence it proceeded he thought it must be the Sitapathiswami of Chidambaram beating the *damaraca*, a kind of small hand drum, (called in Tamil *udukkai*) and most likely the god dancing with Parvati; he in consequence expended great wealth there and built the Kanakasabhai."\(^{68}\)

*Koṟīgudesarajakkal* gives a very useful information regarding the methods that the Chōla kings adopted to evoke popular support from various social groups:

"The Chōla king gave the towns of Keriyur (Talakad district in Koṅgu) to the merchants of Talavanapuram and by their hands made agraharas for

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., pp. 196-97.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., pp. 198-99.
the Brahmins and gave these to them, these Vaisyas having always been accustomed to worship the divine Brahmins (deva Brahmanas).\textsuperscript{69}

*Kořigudesarajakkal* provides remarkable evidence that has high social significance in relation to the origin and migrations of the Veḷḷāḷas. It helps us to solve the riddle of five Koṁgu castes that has bearing on the existence of the Veḷḷāḷas in Koṁgu. The chronicle mentions that Aditya defeated the Vedar and conquered Koṁgu, which means that even as late as ninth century C.E., the Vedar formed the only prominent and dominant caste in the Koṁgu region.\textsuperscript{70} This evidence corroborates the information acquired form the Koṁgu Veḷḷāḷa tradition that the five castes originated as a matter of necessity in the face of the arrogance of the Vedar forces.\textsuperscript{71}

*Kořigumandala Sathagam* is an important tradition that helps to understand certain aspects of Koṁgu history. It was compiled probably in early eighteenth century by a Jain Brahmān, Jinendran, who was later known as Karmeghakavinjar. It deals with brief episodes of Koṁgu history in one hundred stanzas out of which only sixty are available. These stanzas are precious pieces of information about the extent of ancient Koṁgu, its early kings and chieftains, its ancient customs and manners, shrines and temples. However, unlike *Kořigudesarajakkal*, the evidence provided by this document is fragmentary and can be used in form of suggestions. Its main usefulness lies in its

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 204.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 268-69.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 269.
references to a wide range of subjects such as — Kangeyan, Pegan, Karikala, Tondaiman, Konganar, Rajaraja the Great, Katti Mudali, etc.\textsuperscript{72}

*Koṅgumandala Sathagam* supplies precious information that helps us to define the Koṅgu region and ascertain its extent as well as its territorial divisions. It provides the list of names of 24 *nāḍus* that constituted the Koṅgu region. It is important to note the evidence provided by this document is corroborated by the epigraphic evidence.

*Koṅgumandala Sathagam* sheds valuable light on the high state of learning in the Chōla period. It gives useful reference to the famous sage of Koṅgu, Bavanandi, the author of the immortal grammar, *Nannul*:

\begin{quote}
“Olga perum Bavanandi
Entrothi Upakaritha
Valkavalan Siyagangan
Ninral Koṅgu Mandalame”\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

It is perhaps the only source that reveals the high standards of Tamil learning in the Koṅgu region. It further informs us that *Nannul* was composed in Koṅgu in obedience to the request of Ganag king, Siyagangan, who was keen to have an easily-understood grammar of Tamil, in contrast to complicated *Tolkappiyam*.\textsuperscript{74}

*Chōlapurvapataiyam* is another tradition that carries ample information about certain social divisions and communities of the Koṅgu region. It was composed by an anonymous author and on the basis of its content, it can be roughly placed in the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p. 26. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p. 311. \\
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
eighteenth century. It is believed to have been based “on an ancient copper plate preserved for a long time in Conjeevaram, which first came to the notice of King Karikala.” It is important to note that the author had collected in it all the existing traditions. Its chief importance lies in the fact that it throws a good amount of light on the social life of the Koṅgu region. It refers elaborately of the Valangai and Idangai divisions, Velḷālas, Mudaliars and the Kaikkolas. It also gives useful information about the ancient customs, religious usages and ceremonies. It also tells us about the towns and villages of Koṅgu that existed in his time.

ORIGINS OF THE VEḷḷĀLĀS

The question of the origin of the Veḷḷāla is hotly debated among the experts of South Indian history. Drawing on various kinds of data that is available in both history and mythology, the scholars have tried to investigate their origins from different perspectives. Before addressing the origins of Veḷḷāla community, it is essential to look at the genesis of the term itself which may provide important clues to their origins.

Etymological roots of the term ‘Veḷḷālar’:

The word ‘Veḷḷālar’ or ‘Veḷḷālan’ is etymologically derived from ‘Vellanmai,’ where ‘vellam’ means flood and ‘anmai’ stands for control or management, thus suggesting ‘flood-control’ or ‘water management,’ ‘cultivation,’ ‘tillage’ etc. They are mentioned in Sangam literature as ‘Karalar’ which also denotes ‘controller of floods.’

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76 Koṅgu Country, p. 27.
78 Tamil Dict., p. 303.
Attempts have also been made to trace etymological connection of ‘Veḷḷāḷ’ with ‘Pallan’, ‘Palli,’ the term meaning the ‘lord of the Vallas or Pallas.’ It has also been argued that the term ‘Veḷḷāḷ’ extends beyond notions of caste and appears to be a generic term for farming groups who were dispersed over space.

**Mythical Origins of the Veḷḷāḷas:**

The stories pertaining to the origin of Veḷḷāḷas are richly preserved in Tamil legends and traditions. The Baramahal Records provide a mythical account of the Veḷḷāḷa origin:

“In ancient days, when the God Paramesvaradu and his consort the goddess Parvati Devi resided on the top of Kailasa Parvata or mount of paradise, they one day retired to amuse themselves in private, and by chance Visvakarma, the architect of the Devtas or gods, intruded on their privacy, which enraged them, and they cursed him by causing an enemy of his to be born in the Bhuloka or earthly world, who should punish him for his temerity. On Visvakarma’s request, the divine pair told him that the person would spring up into existence from the bowels of the earth on the banks of the river Ganga. Visvakarma vowed to annihilate him with a single blow. One day Visvakarma observed the ground to crack near him, and a kiritam or royal diadem appeared issuing out of the bowels of the earth, which Visvakarma mistook for the head of his adversary, and made a cut at it with his sword, but only struck off the kiritam. In the meantime, the person appeared out of the earth, with a bald pate, holding in his hand a golden ploughshare, and his neck encircled with garlands of flowers. The angry Visvakarma instantly laid hold on him, when the Gods Brahma, Viṣṇu and Shiva and others appeared and interceded for the earth-born personage, and reminded him of his vow and his failure to annihilate the person with a single blow. At the intercession and remonstrance of the gods, Visvakarma quitted his hold and a peace was concluded between him and his enemy on the following stipulation, viz., that the panch jati, or five castes of silversmiths, carpenters, ironsmiths, stone-cutters, and braziers, who were the sons of Visvakarma, should be subservient to the earth-born person. The deities bestowed on the person these three names. First, Bhumi Palakadu or saviour of the earth, because he was produced by her. Second, Ganga kulam or descendent of the river Ganga, by reason of having been brought forth on her banks. Third Murdaka Pulakadu or

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80 Tamil Dict., p. 303.

protector of the plough, alluding to his being born with a ploughshare in his hand, and they likewise ordained that, as he had lost his diadem, he should not be eligible to sovereignty, but that he and his descendants should till the ground with his privilege, that a person of the caste should put the crown on the king's head at the coronation. They next invested him with the yeonopavitas or string, and, in order that he might propagate his caste, they give him in marriage the daughters of the gods Indra and Kubera. At this time, god Siva was mounted on a white bullock, and the god Dharamraja on a white buffalo, which they gave him to plough the ground, and from which circumstance the caste became surnamed Vellal Warus or those who plough with white bullocks. Murdaka Palaku had fifty-four sons by the daughter of god Indra, and fifty-two by the daughter of the god Kubera, whom he married to the one hundred and six daughters of Nala Kubarudu, the son of Kubera, and his sons-in law made the following agreement with him, viz., that thirty-five of them should be called Bhumi Palakulu, and should till the ground; thirty-five of them named Vellal Shetti, and their occupation be traffic; and thirty-five of them named Govu Shetlu, and their employment breeding and feeding of cattle. They gave the remaining one the choice of three orders, but he would not have any connexion with either of them, from whence they surnamed him Agmurdi or the alien. The Agmurdi had born to him 2500 children, and became a separate caste, assuming the appellation of Agmurdi Vellal Waru. The other brothers had 12,000 children, who intermarried, and lived together as one caste, though their occupations were different...”

The Madras Census Report for 1891 refers to another story regarding their origin:

“Many thousands of years ago, when the inhabitants of the world were rude and ignorant of agriculture, a severe drought fell upon the land and the people prayed to Bhudevi, the goddess of the earth, for aid. She pitied them and produced from her body a man carrying a plough, who showed them how to till the soil and support themselves. His offspring are the Vellalas, who aspire to belong to the Vaisya caste, since that includes Govaisyas, Bhuvaisyas and Dhanvaisyas (shepherds, cultivators and merchants). A few, therefore, constantly wear the sacred thread, but most put it on only during marriages or funerals as a mark of the scared nature of the ceremony.”

According to the Purāṇas and Mahabharata, when the numerical strength of the Vels grew in the Gangetic region, Lord Krishna shifted them to a strong fort, which he had built at Dwaraka in order to protect the Vels from the assaults of the Rakhshasas. The migration is also supported by Dowson who says that, ‘...when a new enemy

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threatened Krishna, a Yavana or foreigner named Kala-Yavana, and Krishna had been so weakened that he knew he must succumb either to him or to his old enemy the king of Magadha, so he and all his people migrated to the coast of Guzerat, where he built and fortified the city of Dwarka....Indra came to visit Krishna at Dwaraka, and implored him to suppress the evil deeds of the demon Narakasura... Therefore, from time immemorial it was believed that Lord Krishna was both the protector and the progenitor of the Vels. The prevalence of this notion during the period of Naccinarkiniyar, the commentator of Tolkappiyam, is attested by his remarks regarding Agastya's arrival in South India and Vel-Krishna linkages: "All the gods having gathered on Mount Meru, the mount went down with their weight, and the south rose up, whereupon they chose Agastiyar as the right man to be in the south to redress its balance. The gods requesting Agastiyar, he was soon on his way to the south, when he entered into Dwarka and took along with him 18 kings and 18 families of Vels and Aruvalar of the progeny of the high-crowned Lord, who measured the earth, gave them homes, having destroyed forests.... bound Ravana (from mischief) and having prevented the Rakshasa from coming there, settled himself on the Podiyil (hills).

In Srivyasabharatam, Lord Krishna corroborates the evidence of Nachchinarkiniyar, when he explains his schemes to Uthishtirar:

"O king, we were so much panic-stricken
when Jarasanthan came to us

that all our eighteen families joined
together and made this plan."  

In the opinion of R.G. Bhandarkar, 'after Krishna gets identified as the tribal hero of the Yadavas Baldeva comes to be regarded as his brother.' This argument further strengthens the notion of Krishna-Vel relationship.

The Sangam poet, Kapilar also throws light on the question of Vel origin and Krishna-Vel connection when in one of his poems he mentions that the first lrukkuvel originated from a fire-pit of a northern sage who ruled in Dwarka 'defended by tall forts.' On this basis, S.K. Aiyengar has interpreted that the Vels belonged to the 'agnikula' or 'fire-race.' The remarks of Naccinarkiniyar help us to identify this 'northern sage' as Agastiya who went to Dwaraka and carried with him 18 kings and 18 families of Vels and Aruvaler to South India.

Despite the fact that the mythological traditions are sometimes allegorical in nature, it cannot be denied that the information about the Velša origin gathered from these traditions possesses sufficient weight for its consideration in a meaningful discussion over their origins. However, each of the references and legends retrieved from the above-mentioned mythical accounts need to be corroborated by historical facts and undergo a severe test of validity before they can be accommodated in a larger historical perspective on the Velša origin. This is the main objective of the following discussion.

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Identity of the Vel with the Vellāḷa:

However, before framing a historical perspective regarding Vellāḷa origins, the most pertinent point for consideration is the question of identification of the Vels with the Vellāḷas. Several scholars have tried to establish that the Vels originally came to the south from the north and that they were the progenitors of the Vellāḷas. They have tried to substantiate their position by exploiting the Vel antiquities mentioned in Sangam literature and other sources. However, many others militate against this view. Among the antagonists, K.K. Pillay has found the etymological connection of the Vellāḷa with the Vel as unconvincing and observed that the evidence for this identification is ambiguous on account of inconsistencies. The Vel chieftains of the Sangam age were of the Velir group but were not Vellāḷas; and the Ay Vels who also belonged to the Velir stock were not Vellāḷas but Ays of the shepherd class, since several inscriptions of the Ay Vels call them as the descendents of Yadava origin. It has also been argued that the title 'Kavidi' seems to have been bestowed on the Vellāḷas and not on Velir; nor was the caste suffix 'kilar' conferred to the Velirs but it belonged to the Vellāḷas. Burton Stein has also rejected the idea of considering Irukkuvels as progenitors of the Vellāḷas on ecological grounds. He has argued that in the dry tracts the chiefs were not drawn from Vellāḷa peasants but from hunters and pastoralists; and since the development of wet agriculture was slow in these dry areas, some of the social groups such as Kallar and Maravars

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., p. 230.
transformed to the status of the Veḷḷālas. Stein also cites a Tamil proverb to make his point: “Kallars in time become Maravars who, in turn, changed to Veḷḷālas.

On the other hand, another set of scholars hold the opinion that the Vels and Veḷḷālas are identical to each other and put forward a wide range of evidence from varied sources in support of their hypothesis, much of which have already been discussed above. Dealing with the identity of the Vels and Veḷḷālas in fascinating details, Arokiaswami has postulated the view that the Vel families are the ancestors of the modern Veḷḷālas. This argument draws main sustenance from the fact that both shared the common place of origin. The Gangetic origin of the Veḷḷālas is supported by several proofs—Greek writers mentioning a family of Veḷḷālas in the Deccan, ‘Gangāvida; tradition cited in Baramahal Records locating the origins of the Veḷḷālas in the Gangetic valley, Tondamandalasδakaδam mentioning Karikala Colā shifting Veḷḷāla families from the Gangetic valley to Tondaimandalam; Veḷḷālas being called ‘Gangākula; Veḷḷālas performing northern Indian type rituals etc. Similar kind of evidence can be cited in favour of the northern homeland of the Vels— Vels addressing themselves as the ‘Gangākula’ in early records; the Puranic and Epic references to Lord Krishna transporting Vels from the Gangetic region to Dvaraka; Vel rulers of Orissa during
eleventh and twelfth centuries belonging to 'Gangāvamsa'\textsuperscript{104} etc. Moreover, several places in the Tamil land can be identified which echo Vel connections, namely, Vellanmai (Kanathurnāṭu), Vellar-kurichi (Rajaraja-catur-vedimangalam), Velur (Puralmalaināṭu), Velangudi (Taṅjavūr) etc. without distinguishing 'Vel' from 'Velan.'\textsuperscript{105} A section of the Veḻḷālas, known as 'SoliyaVeḻḷāla', hints at the Cola-Vel correlation ship in early periods.\textsuperscript{106} Even in the modern context, the existence of a heavy Veḻḷāla population in modern Madurai, Tinnevelly and Taṅjavūr districts, which previously corresponded with the core area of the early Vel families, is also an important indicator to the Vel-Veḻḷāla continuum.\textsuperscript{107}

**The Veḻḷāla Identity:**

We begin our discussion by a quick review of the mythological traditions regarding Veḻḷāla origins which leads us into the following broad suppositions that:

i) Veḻḷālas originated as an agricultural caste to educate people how to plough their lands

ii) their original home lies in the Gangetic valley

iii) they were connected with a northern sage, Agastiya.

iv) they belong to the Vaiśya caste

v) they were Yadavas in origin and claim Lord Krishna as their progenitor

Here, an attempt would be made to evaluate the results obtained from the mythical traditions in light of historical evidence and substantiate these points as well as

\textsuperscript{104} Thurston, op. cit., p. 368.
\textsuperscript{105} Vellar Basin, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
point out any other argument that might emerge from this analysis. M. Arokiaswami deals with the origins of the Veḷḷālas in sufficient details and cites an adequate amount of historical and semi-historical evidence to this effect.

The notion that the Ganges valley was the original homeland of the Veḷḷālas derives support from a wide range of evidence. The earliest evidence in this case is found in the second century CE when Pliny and Ptolemy refer to ‘Gangāvida’ as a great and powerful tribe of the Veḷḷālas in the Deccan. It seems to be a variant of the term, ‘Gangāvidu’ or the house of the Gangās. The Greek reference draws support from some early records where the Veḷḷālas are said to have called themselves as the ‘Gangākula’ or the ‘Gangāvamsa because they derived their descent from the powerful tribe Gangvida which inhabited the valley of the Ganges.’ The Purāṇas and the Mahabharata, as mentioned earlier, also speak of the shifting of the Vels from the Gangetic region to the Dwarka fort by Lord Krishna. According to the author of Tondamandalasadamakam the Colā king, Karikala transported a number of Śūdra families from the Gangetic valley, settled them in the 24 kottam (districts of Tondaimandalam), and bestowed on them rich gifts. This observation has been further elaborated and commented upon by the editor of this work who suggested that these Śūdra families were mostly Veḷḷālas, who originally belonged to the Ganges valley and for that reason were known as the ‘Gangākula.’ The continuity and prevalence of the notion of the Gangetic

109 JW McCrindle, Ancient India as Described in Classical Literature (Westminster, 1901).
110 Quoted by Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 368.
112 Ibid., p. 7.
origin of the Veḷḷālas right up to tenth to twelfth century are further confirmed by two important facts. A part of Mysore which was populated mostly by the Veḷḷālas was called ‘Gangāvadi’ in the tenth and eleventh century. Another dynasty of kings of the Veḷḷāla tribe, that ruled Orissa in this period, was known as ‘Gangāvamsa’.

Some of the customs and rituals of the Veḷḷālas also reflect their north Indian linkages. Thurston records a peculiar rite of the Veḷḷālas, called ‘Vilakkidukalyanam’, in which the auspicious ceremony of lighting the light, is performed for girls in the seventh or ninth year or later, but before marriage. The ceremony consists in worshipping Ganesa and the Sun at the house of the girls’ parents. Arokiaswami interprets this unique ceremony among the Veḷḷālas as a strong reminder of the agni cult of the Aryans and their northern affiliations.

The notion of Veḷḷāla-Krishna connection and the consequent idea of the Yadava origin of the Veḷḷālas are also supported by historical data. We have already mentioned legends pointing towards Vel-Krishna links such as Krishna shifting the Vels to Dwarka and the comments of Naccinarkiniyar regarding the advent of Agastiyar into South India. In this context, the information reclaimed from these traditions can be narrowed down to two vital points of historical significance, i.e., that the families protected by Lord Krishna were 18 in number and that they were the Yadavas. The concept of the Yadava origin of the Veḷḷālas is strengthened by the testimony of two inscriptions. The Colá-grantha inscription refers to Samarabhūrama, an Irukkvel ruler as ‘yadhuvamsaketu’ or ‘the

115 Thurston, op. cit., p. vii, p. 368.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., p. 380.
crown of the yaduvamsa." Another inscription from Tirukalakudi in Ramnad district mentions the name of the donor as Tuvarapativelan of Kannamangalam in Solapandyavalanādu, which recalls the Vel connection with Krishna and Dwaraka.

M. Srinivasa Aiyengar has argued that the ancient classification of Tamil tribes is "conspicuous by the absence of the Velar or Veḷḷāḷa caste". In the fourfold classification of land along with its inhabitants, namely, Neytal (Paravar), Mullai (Idayar), Marudam (Mallar) and Kurinji (Kuravar), the Palai is omitted as insignificant and the Veḷḷāḷas are not mentioned. This is not to suggest the non-existence of the Veḷḷāḷas but to emphasize that the Veḷḷāḷas must have fused into one of these four castes, and therefore, the Krishna-Vel connection would emphasize that the Veḷḷāḷas at this time were deemed to be Idayar (Yadavas). It is pertinent to note that V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar refers to the Vels as "the Tamil tribe of the Yadavas."

Bhandarkar's observation that the identification of Krishna as the tribal hero of the Yadavas was followed by the unification of Krishna and Baladeva as brothers boost up the notion of Krishna-Vel relationship. The adoration of Baldeva in Hindu literature as the god of the cultivator and his representation as 'half (the person with the plough)' reinforces this argument. The linking of Krishna and Baldeva as brothers clearly points towards the bond between the Yadavas and the Vels as constituting one group, each

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118 ARE, 1907-08, p. 87.
119 ARE, 36 of 1916.
121 Veḷḷar Basin, p. 21.
122 Ibid.
124 Bhandarkar, op. cit., p. 74.
section having its particular hero. The unity between the two is seemed to have been clinched by the Purāṇas. A Puranic story points out that though Balarama was born of Rohini, "he was first conceived by Devaki from whose womb he was latterly transferred in embryo to that of Rohini." Likewise, the Visnu Purāṇa describes the incident of God Narayana sending down two of his hairs, a white one and a black one, into the womb of Devaki, which in time are born as Balarama, the white one and Krishna, the black one, for the destruction of Kamsa. However, despite the existence of reliable evidence, the discussion over the Vel-Krishna connection cannot be conclusive unless the date of Krishna is determined accurately.

The Sangam poet, Kapilar who referred to the Irukkuvels as the born-rulers of Dwaraka, throws confirmatory light on the Krishna-Vel connections. His observation that the Irukkuvel at Arayam (modern Mysore) was of the forty-ninth generation from the first ancestor takes the kingship of the Irukkuvels to approximately a thousand years before his age, which would amazingly make the period of their rule synchronize with that of Krishna.

Kapilar also talks about the origin of the Irukkuvels from the fire-pit of a northern sage. Based on Naccinarkiniyar, the commentator of Tolkappiyam, one can identify

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126 Vellar Basin..., p. 23.
128 Muir, op. cit., p. 258.
129 Puram, 201.
130 The period of the thousand years is calculated by roughly assigning to each generation twenty years. If Kapilar’s date is granted as second century CE (the age of the Sangam), this period would work out to the eighth century BCE. It may be roughly said that this is synchronistic with the period of Lord Krishna, whom we have proved by other evidences as the first Vel hero. By arguments based on the internal evidence of the Ramayana and on the evidence of Panini we have no doubt fixed the period of Krishna round about the seventh century BCE.
131 Puram. 201.
this figure as Agastiya who went to Dwarka and took 18 families of Vels and Aruvaler to the South.\textsuperscript{132} However, scholars like K.N. Sivaraja Pillai have dismissed Agastiya as "a semi-historical character or possibly allegorical."\textsuperscript{133} However, Arokiaswami says that this observation does not nullify our argument, since if Agastiya is taken as an allegorical representation of the Aryan invasion of the south as these writers concede, he must have gained a personality by the time of the Sangam and the poet Kapilar.\textsuperscript{134} The tradition of Agastiya seems to have been deeply embedded in the memories of the Veḷḷāḷas. Caldwell refers to a belief held by the Veḷḷāḷas that Agastiya still lives in the Podiyil hills presiding over their destiny.\textsuperscript{135} The Sangam poet, Ollaiyurtanda Bhutapandiyan refers to Titiyan, a Velir chieftain, as 'Podiyirselvan,' thus reflecting the reverence of the Vels to the Podiyil hills.\textsuperscript{136} The capital of the Irukkuvel dynasty in South India is called Kodumbalur, a variant of Karambalur, which is reminiscent of Karambai (near Benaras), the native place of Agastiya.\textsuperscript{137} A deity known as Agastyeswara housed by a temple of the same name, located in the ancient Irukkuvel kingdom, also recalls the Vel linkage with Agastiya.\textsuperscript{138}

Another striking point in this connection is the relation between the Vels and the Hoysalas as constituent members of the Yadus, the family of the Yadavas. Arokiaswami cites number of evidence to identify the Irukkuvel chieftain at Arayam (to whom Kapilar's poem referred to) with Sala, the first king of the Hoysalas on the basis of both

\textsuperscript{132} Vellar Basin, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{133} KN Sivaraja Pillai, \textit{Agastiya in Tamil land} (Madras. 1935), p. 61-63.
\textsuperscript{134} Vellar Basin, p. 26.
\textsuperscript{136} Agam, 25.
\textsuperscript{137} The Epics and the \textit{Purāṇas} speak of Agastiya as the native of Karambai on the banks of the Ganges "going to that river in very slow steps in his wooden sandals carefully avoiding the pebbles of lingams, as they are strewn all over the streets of Benaras," \textit{QJMS}, xvii, p. 171.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
sharing the epithet, 'slayer of the tiger.' Certain evidences in terms of names and nomenclature may be cited to support Vel-Hoysala connections. The Hoysala name, 'Ballala' is the Kannada corruption of the Tamil 'Veḻāla,' whereas Gangavadi and Dwarasamudra (capital) bring to mind the places connected with the Vel origin and migration, i.e., Ganges valley and Dwaraka. It is significant to point out the Hoysalas named even their new capital as 'Belur' which can be equated to the Tamil 'Velur'—the city of the Velurs. Also, the Udayendiram copper plates of Pallava King Nandivarman II Pallavamalla mention a Veḻāla Sikhara, the peak of Veḻālas, which confirms the connection of the Velirs with the region. Besides, the Canarese work, Kavi-kantha-hara refers to Belur as 'Velanagari' or 'the city of the Veḻālas.'

SECTION C
SITUATING VEḻĀLAS IN HISTORY AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Occupation and Economy:

The name Veḻāla signifies 'controller of floods,' but in classical literature, they are also referred to as Veḻālar or 'rulers of the flood' and Karalar or 'lords of the cloud.' Their name and titles are expressive of their expertise in controlling floods and in storing water for agricultural purposes. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar refers to Veḻālar as

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139 Mysore Gazetteer, II, ii, p. 1310; Chikmangalur inscription, 20, 137; Belur inscription, 171; Epigraphia Carnatica, v, Intro., p. 10.
140 Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 65.
141 Veḻar Basin, 28-29.
142 Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 65.
143 Ibid.
144 Epigraphia Carnatica, v, Intro., p. xxxii.
145 Tamil Dict. P. 303; Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 368.
conveyor of ‘life-giving water to their fields,’ and to Karalar as the people ‘who stored rain-water in tanks and conveyed them to fields through irrigation channels.’ This shows that the method of flood-control and water-harvesting, and the art of agriculture had reached to considerable heights in early period.

Vellālas are regarded as the most important among the farming communities of the Tamil country. The evidences derived from both the early records, modern reports and their traditions clearly indicate the strong agrarian background and the peasant status of the Vellālas. The mythological traditions of the Vellālas point towards their ploughman identity when they describe how the Vellālas originated from a man carrying a plough who taught the people how to till the soil and support themselves. In the early period, when Karikal the Great defeated the Aruvalar, and annexed their territory to his kingdom, he distributed the conquered lands among Vellāla chiefs. On the other hand, the Vellāla families who conquered Vadukam (Telugu country) were called Velamas and the big landlords of this region still belong to the Velama caste. It is reported that the impoverished sections of the Vellālas who possessed small pieces of land were designated as Veelkudi-Uluvar or ‘the fallen Vellālas,’ which suggests that the remaining Vellālas were owners of large landholdings. Tholkappiyam also mentions that the Vellālas have no other calling than the cultivation of the soil.

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146 Tamil Dict., p. 303.
147 Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 362.
148 Ibid., p. 368. The descendents of some of the Vellāla chiefs still hold possessions of their lands.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
The Madras Census Report states, "The greater part of the Vellaḷas are the peasant proprietors and confine their attention to cultivation." The Madura Manual reports that "most Vellaḷans support themselves by husbandry, which, according to native ideas, is their only proper means of livelihood. But they will not touch the plough, if they can help it, and ordinarily they do everything by means of hired servants." The Sathaga of Narayanan, quoted by Thurston, delineates the duties and status of the Vellaḷas in society— "The Vellaḷans, by the effect of their ploughing maintain the prayers of the Brahmans, the strength of kings, the profits of merchants, the welfare of all. Charity, donations, the enjoyments of domestic life, and connubial happiness, homage to the gods, the Sastras, the Vedas, the Purāṇas, and all other books, truth, reputation, renown, the very being of the gods, things of good report or integrity, the good order of castes, and (manual) skill, all these things come to pass by the merit (or efficacy) of the Vellaḷan's plough. The Coimbatore Manual refers to Vellaḷas as "truly the backbone of the district. It is they who, by their industry and frugality, create and develop wealth, support the administration, and find the money for imperial and district demands. As their own proverb says that, the Vellaḷar's goad is the ruler's sceptre. The bulk of them call themselves Goundans." The Salem Manual describes the Vellaḷa as "frugal and saving to the extreme; his hard-working wife knows no finery, and the Vellalichi (Vellaḷa woman) willingly wears for the whole year the one blue cloth, which is all that the domestic economy of the house allows her. Their food is the cheapest of the 'dry' grains which they happen to cultivate that year. All his money is expended on his land, if the

153 Madras Census Report, 1871.
154 Madura Manual.
155 Thurston, op. cit., p. 371.
156 Ibid.
policy of the revenue administration be liberal; otherwise their hoarded gains are buried."157

It is obvious from the evidences cited above that from time immemorial, the plough cultivation has been the predominant occupation of the Veḻḷālas and they emerge in our period as a distinct peasant community. Owing to their special skills in water management and command over farming practices, the Veḻḷālas rose from the status of controllers of flood and rain-water to the controllers of agrarian economy. It may be argued that with the growth of population and the extension of plough cultivation, land became the most important factor in the socio-economic life of South India. The position of various social groups in society came to be increasingly dependent on their accessibility to land and its resources. The Veḻḷālas' linkages with the land and their considerable control over the landed economy determined to great extent, their social or ritual status in society which shall be discussed below.

During the reign of Jatavarman Sundara Pandya I, a brahmādeya village was established in the Chidambaram taluq, where provisions were made for the settlement of the Veḻḷālar (agriculturists) and pieces of land were allotted to various professionals.158

**Social Status of the Veḻḷālas:**

Given the nature of evidence regarding social status of the Veḻḷālas, ranging from direct references to them as Śūdras to their claims for Vaisya status and Kṣatriyahood, it is rather difficult to ascertain the actual position of the Veḻḷālas in the caste hierarchy. In this discussion, we shall try to examine the ritual and actual status of the Veḻḷālas in

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158 Ramaswamy, Textiles, p. 36.
Tamil social order and try to identify the factors and forces that determined the position of this peasant community. An attempt would be made to delineate the process of social differentiation in South Indian peasantry, which would help us to understand as to how this non-Brahmin landed caste came to be known as Śūdras and to what extent the ritual status of the Veḷḷālas correspond to their economic status?

In the nineteenth century, when the British administrators made attempts to enumerate the various socio-economic and ethnic groups of South India under the varna categories, the Veḷḷālas objected to their being categorized as Śūdras. In their petition, it was stated “we shall first proceed to show that the Veḷḷālas do come exactly within the most authoritative definition given of Vaisyas, and then point out that they do not come within the like definition of the Śūdras.” Manu writes, “to keep herds of cattle, to bestow largesses, to sacrifice, to read the scripture, to carry on trade, to lend at interest, and to cultivate land, are prescribed or permitted to a Vysia.” On grounds of this definition, the Veḷḷālas observed that “it is impossible to imagine that the Veḷḷālas, a race of agriculturists and traders, should have had to render menial service to the three higher classes; for the very idea of service is revolting to the Veḷḷāla, whose profession teaches him perfect independence, and dependence, if it be, upon the sovereign alone for the protection of his proper interests. Hence a Veḷḷāla cannot be of the Śūdra or servile class.”

160 Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 366.
In pursuit of this objective, arguments have been put forward to assert the Vaisya status and respectable position of the Veḷḷālas in society. The story of their origin, quoted in the Madras Census Report, mentions that the Veḷḷālas aspired to belong to the Vaisya caste. According to a tradition, when the rulers of Taṇjāvūr conducted tulabharam, the ceremony of weighing the king in gold and silver, the right to weigh the king was assigned to the Veḷḷālan Chettis. Similarly, the Halasya Purāṇam of Madura refers to the crowning of the king Somasundara Pandien by a Veḷḷāla. Also, Kamban’s Ramayana mentions that the priest Vasista chose a Veḷḷāla to crown Lord Rama. These references portray the Veḷḷālas as the strength of the state and as a mercantile body in charge of weights and measures, thus indicating an unmistakable Vaisya status as laid down by Manu.

Supporting the view ascribing a respectable status to the Veḷḷālas, Kanaksabhai argues that the Arivar or sages occupied the most honoured place among the Tamils, followed by Ulavar or farmers who constituted the landed aristocracy of the country, and that the Chera, Chōla and Pandya kings belonged to the tribe of Veḷḷālas. He further states that the poor Veḷḷālas, owning small landholdings, were known as ‘Veelkudi-Uluvar’ or ‘the fallen Veḷḷālas,’ which means that the rest of the Veḷḷālas were rich landlords. Other references, reporting the Chōla king, Karikala distributing his conquered lands among the Veḷḷāla chiefs, the Veḷḷālas founding the Bellal dynasty in the

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164 Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 366.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 Manu, para 30, ch. ix.
168 V Kanakasabhai, The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago (Madras, 1904), p. 11.
169 Ibid.
Canarese country, and a Veḷḷāḷa dynasty ruling Orissa in eleventh-twelfth century are also suggestive of high-ranking status of the Veḷḷāḷas. The various epithets and titles of the Veḷḷāḷas such as ‘Veḷḷāḷar’ or ‘Karalar’ (controller of floods), ‘Velamas’ (conquerors of Telugu country), and ‘Gangākul’ or ‘Gangāvamsa’ (descendents of powerful Gangāvida tribe) also hint at a relatively superior status of this community.

The basic conception of the Aryan four-fold division of caste found expression in the Sangam age as early as the time of Tolkappiyar. Employing Tamil appellations, he speaks of the four castes of Antanar, Aracar, Vanikar and Veḷḷāḷar, thus equating Brahmins with Antanar, Kṣatriya with Aracar, Vaisyas with Vanikar and Śūdras with Veḷḷāḷas. However, of these four only the Vaisyas bear the Sanskrit name, the rest are Tamil names. According to classical varna system, the first three divisions were called dvijas or twice born, the Śūdras and womenfolk of all varnas were always once born. But, in the Tamil country, the Brahmin or Antanar alone were dvijas or wearers of the sacred thread; and the rest Aracar, Vanikar and Veḷḷāḷar were all non-dvijas. Thus, the rest three divisions were distinguished from one another by the variation in occupation but against the Brahmins they were all non-dvijas; so in effect the varna system got effectively modified here and the people could be divided varna-wise only into the

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170 Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 368.
171 Tamil Dict., p. 303.
172 Thurston, op. cit., vii, p. 368.
173 Ibid.
176 N Subrahmanian, op. cit., p. 268.
177 Ibid., pp. 269, 311.
Brahmins and the non-Brahmins.\textsuperscript{178} Obviously, there is no reference to Veḷḷālas wearing the sacred thread (punul), which is an Aryan practise adopted by the high caste Tamils to claim superiority over the other castes.\textsuperscript{179}

Tolkappiyangar’s classification of the four castes has been described as a superimposition of the northern or Aryan social divisions over the existing order in Tamilham in which he has not only deviated from the theoretical prescriptions but also failed to comprehend the entire gamut of the Tamil society.\textsuperscript{180} “The four-fold system of the Aryans,” writes K.K. Pillay, “was not a systematic imposition of the Aryan pattern in its entirety. The Brahmins were there, though not all the Brahmins were Aryans. A gradual incorporation of certain sections of the Tamil country resulted in the final formation of that group. But neither the Kṣatriyas nor the Vaiśyas were organised on a clear-cut basis. All the rest who constituted the majority were erroneously described by Tolkappiyar as Veḷḷālas, equating them with the Śūdras of the Aryan classification. But numberless sub-castes had emerged even before the advent of the Aryans and that process has continued through the ages. Though it is out of place here to discuss merits and drawbacks of Aryan system based largely on varna and Dravadian pattern based principally on occupations, the two came to be combined in due course into an unified whole, not always with happy results.”\textsuperscript{181} P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar has also observed that “the Brahmins did not succeed in arranging the people of South India as members of four varnas as they did in North India; it only led to confusion of castes and prevalence of

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., pp. 186, 269.
\textsuperscript{179} P Subramanian, op. cit., p. 30.
\textsuperscript{180} KK Pillay, op. cit., p. 229.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., p. 234.
social jealousies that have characterized the life of South India for a thousand five hundred years.

It has been argued that the Veḷḷālas were not in such a lowly condition as was envisaged for the Śūdra by the Dharamasastras. On account of the absence of Tamil castes corresponding to the Kṣatriya and Vaisya status, all the non-Brahmins, higher or lower, were branded as Śūdras which the higher caste Śūdras like Veḷḷālas and Mutaliyars did not relish. From this, it appears that the Śūdras represented the 'genuine mass of Tamil society.'

To great extent, Tolkappiyanar’s identification of the Veḷḷālas with the Śūdras has caused confusion, and therefore, the position of the Veḷḷālas deserves consideration at some length.

N. Subrahmanian says that “there were no Śūdras in Tamilnādu. Śūdra is a varna division and is not any particular caste. The word does not occur in Sangam literature. In later times upper class caste Hindus designated labouring community as ‘Śūdra.’ ‘Veḷḷālas’ are agricultural workers, owners of land as well as toilers thereon. Velanmai is agriculture, Veḷḷālas were peasant farmers. Some of them were called ‘Chitrameli-nattar.’ They worshipped the ploughshare. There seems to have been seventy-nine different places where they flourished. The servants in the farmlands were serfs whose status and condition were no better than those of slaves. In ancient Tamilnādu Veḷḷālas had the right of intermarriage with members of royal families.” Thus, it seems that the varna system in its entirety was not known in the Tamil land because there were neither Kṣatriyas nor

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182 PT Srinivasa Iyengar, Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture, p. 20.
183 N Subrahmanian, op. cit., p. 269.
184 P Subramanian, op. cit., p. 60.
185 Ziegenbalg’s writings cited by Suvira Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 29, 93n.
186 KK Pillay, op. cit., p. 229.
In this way, the Tamil rulers were not dvijas and the Veļḷālas were not Śūdras; and the Brahmins, many of whom were immigrants from the north, were the only representative of the varna system here. Burton Stein thinks that as a social category, the term Śūdra was less relevant in South India, but with respect to ritual participation, it continued to have currency.

According to Risley, "the Śūdras of Indo-Aryan tradition were originally a Dravadian tribe which was thus incorporated into the social system of the conquering race." He has enumerated a number of castes which may be described as tribes absorbed into Hinduism, namely, "the Ahir, Dom and Dosadh of the united Provinces and Bihar; the Gujar, Jat, Meo and Rajput of Rajputana and the Punjab; the Koli, Mahar and Maratha of Bombay; the Bagdi, Bauri, Chandal (NamŚūdras), Kaibartta, Pod and Rajbansi-Kochh of Bengal; and in Madras the Mal, Nayar, Veļḷāla and Paraiyan or Parial, of whom the last retain traditions of a time when they possessed an independent organization of their own and had not been relegated to a low place in the Hindu social system."  

Kanakasabhai has tried to explain the position of the Veļḷālas by pointing out some references in Tolkappiyam. He says that in his description of classes of society, the author of Tolkappiyam, apparently omits reference to Arivar or sages and places the Brahmins who wields the sacred thread as the first caste, kings as the second caste and

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188 Ibid., p. 132.
189 Ibid.
190 Stein, Peasant State, p. 85.
191 Herbert Risley, The People of India (Delhi, 1969), p. 76.
192 Ibid.
merchants as the third caste, without mentioning that either of the last two castes wear the sacred thread. Here, the Veḷḷāḷas are mentioned as carrying out no other occupation except the cultivation of the soil. From these observations of Tolkappiyan, one may draw an inference that those Veḷḷāḷas who were kings should be regarded as Kṣatriyas and the ordinary Veḷḷāḷas should be reckoned as Śūdras. Kanaksabhai has interpreted this classification as the first attempt by the Brahmins to bring the Tamils under the caste system. But, owing to the non-existence of the Kṣatriya, Vaisya and Śūdra categories in Tamil country, this endeavour possibly failed to achieve desired result; and the discrepancies in the system can be highlighted by the fact that even to this day the Veḷḷāḷa does not take meals at the hands of a Padaiyadchi, who claims to be a Kṣatriya, or a merchant who calls himself Vaisya.  

Champakalakshmi has tried to trace evidence of a broad dual division of Tamil society from a reference to the canror (uyarndor) and ilicinar; whereby the dominant chiefs and landed elite (Velir, Kilavan etc.) were collectively called as canror (the superior ones), and the lower people engaged in subsistence economy were termed as ilicinar (the inferior ones). However, it is in the medieval commentaries of the Sangam texts that we find reference to the superior Veḷḷāḷas (land owners) and inferior Veḷḷāḷas (cultivators) occurring together with the Velir chiefs as the dominant landowning groups controlling considerable area of cultivable land.

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194 Ibid.  
196 Champakalakshmi, *Trade*, p. 31.
N. Subrahmanian has postulated four divisions of Tamil society, i.e., the four communities, the Antanar, Aracar, Vanikar and Vellālar forming one group; the *pancamas*, a second group; the tribals, the third group; and the foreigners or *mlechchas*, constituting the fourth group. Except at the level of the Brahmins, he plausibly notices considerable social mobility in this formulation, particularly the kings having marital relations with the Vellālas, and the merchants not differentiating from the farmers except in occupation. He identifies two kinds of the Vellālas, the landowners and the tillers; the landowners again had two categories, those who leased out their lands, and others who cultivated the land themselves. Social status was probably determined not so much by birth as by occupation and possession of office and wealth.

It has been argued that the land relations in South India came to be organised around the brahmadeya and temple with three kinds of landowners—the Brahmins, the Vellāla and the temple, who emerged as the local elite.

Social differentiation in South India has also been explained through linguistic framework. The language of the Saiva scriptures (Tamil) and of the Vaisnava scriptures (Tamil, Sanskrit and Manipravala) had some linkages with the caste orientation as the Saivas became predominantly Vellāla and the Vaisnavas predominantly Brahmins.

It has been argued that owing to the changed perception of the functional role of the Vaiśya and Śudra varnas in early century of the Christian era, the land-based agricultural communities of South India were placed in Śudra varna and they stood next

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197 N Subrahmanian, op. cit., p. 269.
198 Champakalakshmi, *Trade*, p. 42.
only to Brahmans. This is attributed to the failure of the emergence of viable social groups, which could be identified as Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas in the specific material conditions. By the time Brahmanical theory had also begun to weigh the relative purity and rank of a community in terms of the myth of anuloma and pratiloma marriage of the original founder couples. The position of the peasant communities of South India seem to have been determined by the prevalent notions of purity and pollution. Hence, the Veḻālas who were landowners and tillers and held offices pertaining to land were ranked as Śūdras but became a status category at regional or sub-regional level. The Veḻāla caste has very wide geographical spread in the Tamil country and it so happened that landed communities quite different from Veḻāla claimed Veḻāla status and gained acceptance and intermarried with older Veḻālar families. Thus caste ideology could even transcend varna categories while retaining notions of hierarchy, endogamy and functional similarities to organize varied structural forms.

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya has argued that the physicians whose ‘science-consciousness’ went against the needs of social hierarchy were condemned as Śūdras by the Brahmin lawgivers. With technical knowledge being hereditary, the degradation of the physician might have led to the formation of the Vaidya caste in Bengal and its ultimate designation as a clean Śūdra caste. In the same fashion, the Kayasthas are said to

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200 Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 17.
201 Ibid.
202 Ibid.
205 Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 18.
have branded as Śūdra. But Brahmanical prejudice alone could not have gained currency without a major shift in the meaning and notion of the term 'Śūdra' which was able to accommodate influential groups like Kayasthas, Vaidyas, Velḷālas and Reddys at one end of the spectrum and Candalas at the other. Hence, the notion that a Śūdra was supposed to serve the dvijas implies only the patronage of the Brahmins in the case of the well-to-do high caste Śūdras, thus the term dvija becoming synonymous with the Brahmins. From this contention, we can surmise that the Velḷālar expertise in flood-control and water harvesting might have invited the similar kind of prejudice from the lawgivers which might have led to their social degradation and accommodation as sat Śūdras.

Geeta Dharampal refers to a Tamil poem, Ererubadu, cited by Ziegenbalg, a seventeenth-century Pietist-Lutheran missionary based in the Danish enclave of Tranquebar, which is in praise of the plough and places the Śūdra Velḷāla on a pedestal even higher than the Brahmin. She quotes, 'even being born a Brahmin does not by far endow one with the same excellence as when one is born into a Velḷāla family.' The high praise of the Śūdra Velḷālas is reminiscent of the panegyrist of Singaya Nayaka of Akkalapundi grant, who claimed that the Śūdra varna to which his patron belonged was higher than the other three varnas, as it came out of the feet of Visnu along with the holy river Ganga. Suvira Jaiswal argues that in South India, the Śūdras stood next only to

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207 RS Sharma, Social Changes in Early Medieval India (c. CE 500-1200), The First Devraj Chanana Memorial Lecture (Delhi, 1969), pp. 9-10.
208 Jaiswal, op. cit., pp. 76-77.
209 Gita Dharampal, op. cit., pp. 82-100.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
the Brahmins and was not a degraded status as was the case in the Gangetic valley, the cradle of the fourfold varna system.\textsuperscript{212}

The status of the Vellālas is also reflected in the caste and ritual ranking around the temple which was a major factor of social differentiation. The Pallar and the Paraiyar, who were outcastes and whose entry was barred in the temple, are said to have worked as agricultural labourers for the temple, Brahmins and Vellālas.\textsuperscript{213}

Stein has conceptualized three social strata in South India, namely, Brahmins, sat (respectable) non-Brahmins and low castes, out of which the middle strata, comprising of most of landed peasantry, was further bifurcated into highly competitive valarīgai and idarīgai, the right-hand and left-hand castes; but the dominant peasant groups such as Vellālas, Reddis and Kammas sought to remain above dual divisions on account of their highly prestigious and special relationship with the Brahmins which consolidated their social position vis-à-vis other cultivating groups. However, at another point, Stein contradicts his position when he refers to the Vellālas as ‘the dominant peasants of the right division, the valarīgai’.\textsuperscript{214} Incidentally, Hutton has also stated that the Vellālas belonged to the right-hand division.\textsuperscript{215} Broadly, the landed community of the Vellālas performed administrative and military functions; and the nattar, leading men of nādu, belonged to this caste.\textsuperscript{216} The strength of this community can also be ascertained from the fact that a large portion of the army of Rajaraja Chōla was raised and commanded by the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Champakalakshmi, ‘State & Economy’, p. 283.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Ibid., p. 187. Also see Jaiswal, op. cit., p. 118, n218.
\item \textsuperscript{215} JH Hutton, \textit{Caste in India} (Cambridge, 1946), p. 60.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Jaiswal, op. cit., 67.
\end{itemize}
dominant peasantry of the Veḷḷālas. However, an inscription, found at Aduturai, in Trichinipoly district, throws revealing light on the exclusion of the Veḷḷālas from the right and left-hand divisions. It records an agreement among themselves, by the Valangai 98 classes, and the Idangai 98 classes of Valudalambattuussavadi as against the Brahmins and the Veḷḷālans, who held proprietary rights (kani) over the lands of that district.

The Jesuit sources also concede that the Veḷḷālas occupied the highest place among the Śūdras. Adhering to vegetarianism and devout way of life, the Veḷḷālas vied with the Brahmins in temporal and spiritual pursuits, and strictly opposed the concept that they were created for servitude. They spread their choicest doctrines of Saiva Siddhanta through their own mathas and educational centres and lived apart to maintain their purity and integrity. It may be noted that the Saivas established powerful non-Brahmin lineages as custodians of the Saiva Siddhanta canon, based on the support from the Veḷḷālas, the merchants and Kaikkola groups.

Formation of Community Identity:

The Veḷḷālas, who are strongly represented in almost every district of Tamilnādu, are considered as a peasant community par excellence. It has been argued that the term 'Veḷḷāla' extends beyond notions of caste and seems to be a generic term for spatially dispersed farming groups. This gives an impression that the Veḷḷālas are not a homogeneous people but an umbrella category that includes different peasant

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217 Stein, Peasant State, p. 85.
218 ARE, 34 of 1913.
219 P Subramanian, op. cit., p. 38.
220 P Subramanian, op. cit., p. 38. Also see Champakalakshmi, ‘From Devotion’ p. 152.
221 Champakalakshmi, Trade, p. 71.
223 Tanul Dict., p. 303.
communities. They were divided into four principal groups, named after the tract of
country in which the ancestors of each lived, namely, Coliya or Soliya Vellālas, or people
of the Chōla country, i.e., Tañjāvūr and Trichinopoly districts; Tondaimandala Vellālas,
or the inhabitants of the Pallava country, i.e., Chingleput and North Arcot districts;
Pandya Vellālas or the residents of the Pandyan kingdom of Madura and Tinnevelly; and
Kōṅgu Vellālas or those who belong to the Kōṅgu country, i.e., Coimbatore and Salem
districts. The division of the Vellālas are further accentuated by the distinct titles
adopted by these categories, viz., ‘Pillai’ by the Coliya Vellālas and Pandya Vellālas;
‘Mudaliar,’ ‘Reddi’ and ‘Nainar’ by Tondaimandala Vellālas; and ‘Goundar’ or
‘Kavandan’ by the Kōṅgu Vellālas respectively. These titles indicate that each of these
divisions of the Vellālas is characterized by separate cultural traits and somewhat
distinguishing socio-economic patterns. It is essential to identify and appreciate the
distinguishing elements of these units so as to facilitate a scientific and profound
understanding of this great farming community of the Tamil country. However, on
account of our academic constraints, the focus of study shall be restricted to the Kōṅgu
Vellālas, who have been the most dynamic representative of the Vellālas in one of the
most diverse and complex regions of South India.

The Kōṅgu Vellālas is the predominant caste which gives an overall character and
a special identity to the Kōṅgu region. In the central areas of the region, this peasant
group enjoy such a perfect communion with their ecology and surroundings that they are

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225 Ibid.
226 Brenda Beck, Perspectives, p. 86.
readily identified with the Koṅgu region.\textsuperscript{227} It is believed that the Koṅgu Veḷḷālas branched out from the main line of the celebrated Veḷḷāla peasantry and settled down in the Koṅgu region. They introduced plough cultivation\textsuperscript{228} and transformed the patterns of economic life of the region. They are well-recognized as the leading cultivating caste of the Koṅgu region, which is fittingly justified by their own proverb, "Veḷḷāla’s goad is the ruler’s sceptre."\textsuperscript{229} It is primarily due to its association with the Koṅgu Veḷḷālas that the Koṅgu region assumed a dynamic and distinct identity in the peninsular India.

It has been argued that the Koṅgu Veḷḷālar trace their origin from Karur, Erode and Dharapuram.\textsuperscript{230} This view is based on the fact that their clan deities belong to these places which are annually visited by them to celebrate the temple festivals.\textsuperscript{231} It has been suggested by Thurston that the Koṅgu Veḷḷālas seem to have little in common with the other Veḷḷālas, except their name.\textsuperscript{232}

The Veḷḷālar community of the Koṅgu region is either called ‘Koṅgu Veḷḷālar’ or ‘Goundar,’ and in some places the two regard each other as different entities.\textsuperscript{233} However, the Vanniyar, a Kṣatriya caste of the Koṅgu region, also use the title, Goundar.\textsuperscript{234} It may be noted that that the Koṅgu Veḷḷālas are believed to have started using the title Goundar from the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{235} Regarding the term Koṅgu Veḷḷālar, we can be certain that it is region-specific designation for a splinter group of an extensive cultivating class.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{229} P Subramanian, op. cit., p. 39.
\item \textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{232} Thurston, op. cit., iii, p. 417.
\item \textsuperscript{233} \textit{Tamil Dict.}, p. 303.
\item \textsuperscript{234} KS Singh, \textit{People of India}, p. 1633.
\item \textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Goundar seems to be an honorific title borrowed from the people of the northern districts of Tamil Nādu. Nevertheless, both these titles are not indistinguishable and Goundar seems to have been in use in Koṅgu long before the Veḷḷāḷas migrated and settled in this territory. In some sources, the Koṅgu Veḷḷāḷas are also referred to as Kavundars.

The development of caste system and the formation of caste identities in the peripheral zone of Koṅgu was a prolonged process which is marked by stages of incursions, invasions, migration and colonization. Important evidence in this connection is a long copper plate, preserved in Kanchipuram, called the Chōlān Purva Pattayam, which technically appears to be an inscription, but due to the nature of its information and style, is treated as a literary source. Though the date of this record is disputed, it is a valuable source of information regarding the process of colonization of Koṅgu as it refers to the settlement of the Kaikkolar (weavers), Veḷḷāḷar (agriculturists) and Kammalar (artisans) in the Koṅgu country by Karikala Chōla (Kulottunga III). The process of assimilation of outer groups into the society of isolated uplands of Koṅgu seem to have begun from roughly CE 1000 which was facilitated by the horizontal division of caste groupings in Koṅgu society.

237 Brenda Beck, op. cit., p. 86.
239 Ibid., p. 181-82, 27n: While the copper plate inscription claims to belong to the period of Karikala Chōla, the reference to the Muslim invasions shows that it cannot have been written earlier than the thirteenth century and it pertains most probably to the reign of Kulottunga III. Its chronology has been effectively proved by Arakiaswami in his article, ‘The Chōlān Purva Pattayam: Its Historical Value,’ *Journal of Indian History*, vol. xxxii, 1954, pp. 5-10.
240 Ibid., Also see *Koṅgu Country*, pp. 26, 257.
Owing to its relative isolation from external contacts, Koṅgu remained relatively less developed and less civilized than other regions of peninsular India, and as a result, it developed certain distinctive traits of great social significance. From ancient times, five castes or panja jati are known to have belonged to Koṅgu, namely, the Koṅgu Vellālas, Koṅgu Chettis, Koṅgu barbers, Koṅgu washer man and Koṅgu Pariahs. Thurston points out that the term Konga was used as a term of contempt and ridicule among the Badagas of the Nilgiri hills, and 'a tall, lean and stupid individual is generally called a Kongan.' In light of these popular notions about the inhabitants of Koṅgu, the colonization and civilization of Koṅgu at the behest of the Colā rulers, supported by Purvapattaiyam sounds quite reasonable. The tradition cited by Nicholson is also quite pertinent in this context: 'Kongan (a son of the Chera king) remained in Karur and married a foreign (Colā) princess, who being dissatisfied with the wild nature of the country and its inhabitants (Vedar) managed to get a colony of Vellālas introduced, by whom the country was brought under cultivation.'

At this point, it is essential to determine the period of the emergence of the five castes of Koṅgu in order to understand the formation of the Koṅgu Vellālar. According to Koṅgudesarajakkal, Aditya Colā defeated the Vedar and conquered Koṅgu, which confirms the existence of the Vedar as a powerful caste in Koṅgu in the ninth century. A traditional story, richly preserved by the Vellālas, says that 'when on one occasion a barber was shaving the beard of a Koṅgu Vellāla, the chief of the Vedar happened to pass

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242 Koṅgu Country, p. 267
243 Ibid., Stein, Peasant State, p. 314.
244 Thurston, op. cit., iii, p. 417.
246 Taylor, MJLS, xiv, p. 15.
247 Koṅgu Country, p. 269.
by on horseback; and, summoning the barber to his presence, he sent him on an errand which left the poor Koṅgu Veḷḷāla with half-shaven face.' Since then, the Koṅgu Veḷḷālas has been choosing barbers from their own caste. This is further corroborated by the modern existence of two types of barbers in Coimbatore— the Vettuva barber and the Koṅgu barber, as well as by the five castes refraining from accepting services of Vettuva barber. Thus, it shows that the emergence of the five castes of Koṅgu was a result of a social exigency, i.e., the need to check and contain the growing superiority and arrogance of the Vedar.\(^{248}\)

Therefore, the origin of the pañja jāti or five castes of Koṅgu can be situated in the process of migration and assimilation which began in the tenth century CE. Brenda Beck says that the Veḷḷālas migrated to Koṅgu at the behest of the Colā kings somewhere between the tenth and the twelfth centuries.\(^{249}\) According to V. Ramamurthy, it is from the middle of tenth century CE that Koṅgu came under the autonomous rule of the members of the collateral Chera rulers who bore the titles and names of the imperial Colās and ruled over this region for about three centuries.\(^{250}\)

Taking a cue from the situation that resulted in the origin of the pañja jāti and other circumstantial evidence, we can identify two stages of Veḷḷālar migration into Koṅgu, the first dating from the late-ninth and tenth centuries, and the second stage occurring in the late-twelfth and thirteenth century.

\(^{248}\) Ibid.
\(^{249}\) Ibid.
\(^{250}\) Ramamurthy, op. cit., p. 4.
During the first stage, the Veḷḷāḷar and other groups of *panja jati* entered the Kōṅgu region from the south on the eve or along with the first Colā incursions in ninth century.²⁵¹ This period witnessed remarkable changes in terms of demographic changes, movements, settlement, assimilation and collision. The process of Veḷḷāḷar migration and settlement into Kōṅgu was accompanied by prolonged conflict and clash between the Veḷḷāḷar immigrants and previously settled hunting and pastoral communities whom the Veḷḷāḷars pushed into remote border areas.²⁵² The events related to this process of war and settlement find vivid depiction in an epic that is still sung by the bards of Kōṅgu. The main groups that were displaced by the Veḷḷāḷar immigrants included Vedar, Kurumbar, Vettuva, Natu, Palu etc., who can still be traced in sizeable numbers in the marginal areas of the Kōṅgu region.²⁵³ The immigrating groups of Kōṅgu, including Kōṅgu Veḷḷāḷar who adopted the prefix Kōṅgu as a caste name shared a set of mutual relationships which finds expression in their kinship and ritual exchanges.²⁵⁴

Arokiaswami has tried to show that the process of social stratification was already completed before the second stage of Veḷḷāḷar migration. In other words, the first group of Veḷḷāḷar immigrants, who had settled in Kōṅgu as Kōṅgu Veḷḷāḷar, had become stratified in accordance to their occupations by the time of Kulottunga III.²⁵⁵ Caste penetration into Kōṅgu was at this time prominently effected by the Veḷḷāḷas, who had evolved various occupational castes from among themselves in course of time both as

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²⁵¹ *Kōṅgu Country*, p. 269.
²⁵² Brenda Beck, op. cit., p.87.
²⁵³ Ibid.
²⁵⁵ *Kōṅgu Country*, p. 269.
matter of necessity and of convenience.\textsuperscript{256} Two inscriptions can be cited in support of this observation. One inscription of CE 1010, found in Nelvay (Salem district), records the grant of land to the temple of Nelvay by Nanni Gamundan, son of the Brahmadhira\textsuperscript{ja} (Col\textsuperscript{a} Perundaram), who was ruling the Tagadurn\textsuperscript{a}du.\textsuperscript{257} This is the first epigraphic record of the term 'gavundan' which is generally used for a Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}la. Another inscription, from Bhavanikudal (Coimbatore district), roughly belonging to the same period, records the construction of mandapa and various parts of a local temple by Emmadecuttee Mudaliar.\textsuperscript{258} This is the first insciptional reference to 'Mudaliar,' who were originally Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}las who had adopted commerce and took interest in public undertakings. The name Mudaliar seem to have originated from the root word 'muthal' (lit. the first), thus signifying the first in society or the one who enjoys high social position (muthalidam).\textsuperscript{259}

The second migration the Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}lar into the Korgu region took place in the latter half of the twelfth or at the commencement of the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{260} This phase of the colonization of Korgu by Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}las, Kaikolas and Chettis is represented in Purvapattaiyam. However, it is noteworthy that the Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}lar immigrants of the second phase were strikingly different from those who arrived in the tenth century. The close-knit linkages amongst the *panja jati* of Korgu tend to differentiate the early Korgu Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}las from the later Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}la immigrants.\textsuperscript{261} The later Ve\textsuperscript{ll}\textsuperscript{a}lar immigrants, who settled in modern district of Salem, can be identified by the different caste tags with which they

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid., 67 A.
\textsuperscript{259} *Korgu Country*, p. 271. It may also refer to money or capital (*muthal*) in business.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., p. 270.
\textsuperscript{261} Stein, *Peasant State*, p. 314.
styled themselves such as *Tentisai-Coliya-Vellālar* (Sendalai Vellālar) of the Kāvēri region, and *Padaiyatchi-Vellālar* (armymen) of Kanchipuram.262

In the thirteenth century, Koṅgu underwent a process of social churning that had great historical significance and Kulottunga III was the key figure in this social transformation.263 The most striking change is said to have occurred within the ambit of *valarīgai* and *idārīgai* divisions or the right-hand and left-hand castes. Though both of them claim separate mythological origins, the common explanation seems to be that when Karikala Colā was presiding over a dispute between the two, one stood to his right and the other to his left, leading to the twin designations, right-hand (*valarīgai*) and left-hand (*idārīgai*).264 Regarding the identity of ‘Karikala,’ the possibility of Karikala of Sangam age has been ruled out.265 It may be noted that the first reference to this differentiation of castes is found in an inscription of Rajendra I of eleventh century where only *va/arīgai* is mentioned.266 Since, the only ruler after Rajendra to adopt the title ‘Karikala’ was Kulottunga III, it is quite possible that the dispute between *valarīgai* and *idārīgai* occurred during the reign of Kulottunga III.267 It is noteworthy that the first reference to *idārīgai* is reported from Uttatur (Trichnopoly) inscription which is also dated in the reign of Kulottunga III.268 Crole refers to the settlement of right and left-hand disputes at Kanchipuram when separate flags were allocated to each group.269

*Purvapattaiyam* refers to Karikala (Kulottunga) evolving caste differentiations and

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263 *Koṅgu Country*, p. 272.
264 *ARE*, 1921.
266 *ARE*, 341 of 1907.
colonizing Koṅgu with new castes, and also brings to light his determination to establish social order in Koṅgu through caste rules (*samayathittam*). The castes grouped under *valarīgai* seem to have claimed warrior hood and scorned others, who ultimately organized themselves into another group, which was later known as *idarīgai*. The Veḻālas along with Kaikolas constituted the chief *valarīgai* division, whereas Kammalas made the chief *idarīgai* caste. Thus the reign of Kulottunga can be described as an epoch of remarkable social changes in terms of social stratification and caste rigidity. His greatest contribution to the social system in Koṅgu was the introduction of three illustrious castes in the region, namely, the Veḻālas, the Kaikolars and valarīgaiyar (which included several Vaisya communities). In this process, the *idarīgai* castes were probably overlooked which led to their marginalization at the hands of Valanagi groups and their declaration of their rights and privileges. These changes laid the foundation for the crystallization of right-hand and left-hand divisions and functioning of ninety-eight sub-castes within the framework of these two divisions. The emergence of the Koṅgu Veḻālar within the ranks of right-hand division was of great historical significance. The relations of the Koṅgu Veḻālar with the *idarīgai* communities reveal the degrees of social conflict and the growing strength of the Veḻālars. An inscription, belonging to the reign of Kulottunga III, refers to rigorous struggle over the deprivations and claims of rights and privileges at Kanchipura, which Thurston has interpreted as a
clash between the Vellālas and the Kammalas.\textsuperscript{276} This evidence may reflect the social cleavage between the two communities in the Koṅgu region where the Vellālas had already obtained pre-eminence on account of their growing power and numerical strength. Three inscriptions of Coimbatore district, found at Karur, Modakkur and Perur, referring to privileges of the Kammalar by royal decree clearly show unfriendly relations of the Kammalar with other groups of Koṅgu region and hence the need of royal intervention.\textsuperscript{277}

\textsuperscript{276} Thurston, op. cit., iii, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{277} Koṅgu Country, p. 276.