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Cattle Raiding in Sangam Age

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Introduction: Cattle raiding, lifting, stealing, and recovering in Sangam period pose an interesting and challenging topic covering aspects of seizure (Vetchi) and recovery (Karandai) of cattle. Widely differing views have been expressed by The Indian scholars who dealt with this subject earlier. Based on Aryan and Dravidian hypotheses and theories, they have approached the issue and arrived at their respective conclusions.

- ⇒ Cattle raiding has thus been considered as one of the processes of Aryanization of Dravidians;
- ⇒ Brahmanization of Tamil literature by embodying the advanced consciousness of contemporary Aryan culture and working on material from Tamil society with intimate knowledge;
- ⇒ poetic fantasy of making Tamil people as cow protectors at one place and cow sacrificers and cow eaters at another place and so on¹.

Significantly, G. U. Pope² [1899] recognized the importance of cattle-raiding in the poetry of Purapporul Venba Malai and Purananuru and noted that, “*It can hardly be less than ten centuries old ... (225)it is more ancient than the Kural (226)....cattle-lifting is a chief topic in all these poems (241).....three Tami inscriptions found at Kol-muttngur (குத்தூற்றுக் கூற்றம்)...*” Bruce Lincoln³ [1976], dealing with the myth of “cattle-raiding,” concluded that, “*Finally, an ethical concern seems to be present in our myth, for it must be noted that Triton's raid was not unprovoked aggression, but followed upon the tricephal's earlier theft. It is thus justified, for the I-E hero is only taking back that which rightfully belongs to his people*”. The western scholars approached the issue with their own bias against cows and their importance in Indian society thus, F. R. Allchin [1963] in his study of the Deccan as mounds about “Neolithic Cattle-keepers of South India” concluded that they were formed by the periodic burning of cattle-pens in celebrating certain seasonal festivals and the Vedic words bhuti and vibhuti were derived from Dravidian ‘budi’, though he too, discussed about vetchi and karandai of Tolkappiyam, Pattuppattu and Ettutogai⁴. V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar giving examples from the Vedic, Itihasa and Puranas, had drawn attention to Tamil literature citing from Cilappatikaram and Purapporul Venba

¹ N. K. Mangala Murugesan, **Sangam Age**, Thendral Pathipagam, Madras, 1982, pp.131-1323; and 154-155.

² G. U. Pope, **Extracts from the Tamil Purra-porul Venbamalai and the Purra-nanuru**, in Journal of Royal Asiatic Society, Vol.32, Issue.2, April, 1899, pp.221-269.

³ Lincoln, Bruce. **The Indo-European cattle-raiding myth**. History of Religions, University of Chicago Press, Vol. 16, No.1, August 1976, pp. 42-65.

⁴ F. R. Allchin, **Neolithic Cattle-keepers of South India – A study of Deccan Ashmounds**, Cambridge University Press, London, 1963, p.178.

In introduction, he has mentioned about the western attitude towards cows, cow dung, cow worship, gosalas etc (pp.ix-x).

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Malai⁵. These are only for illustrative purposes and not exhaustive to show that the researchers were seized of the issue of cattle raiding with that of Aryan-Dravidian divide. Keeping the Aryan-Dravidian race theories aside, an integrated approach is adopted in this paper to analyze the literary, anthropological and archeological evidences.

2. Literary evidences - Tolkappiyam: As Tolkappiyam is supposed to be the ancient extant grammsr text in Tamil, its sutras are taken for interpretation in the context. Tolkappiyar in his first verses of Purattinaiyiyal [புறத்திணையியல்] explains about vetchi [வெட்சி] or cattle raiding⁶. Assigning the term Atantombal [ஆதந்தோம்பல்], he says that the protection of cattle by bringing them from the lands of enemies is called vetchittinai (வெட்சித்திணை, category of cattle seizure). Then, he gives the various stages involved in it:

1. the noise of marching army for the seizure and recovery of cattle (படையிங்கரவம், இயங்குபடையரவம், வெட்சியரவம், Iyengaravam).
2. hearing the words of good omens and taking the opportunity of them (விரிச்சி, viritchi).
3. execution of these operations in such a way that the spies of the respective side, do not know the movement of the others [செலவு].
4. passing of such information [வேய்].
5. setting enemy territory and villages on fire (புறத்திறை, purattirai).
6. killing the sentries watching over them in the former and protecting in latter (ஊர்கொலை, Orkolai).
7. seizing and recovery of cattle from the respective ends (ஆகோள், akol).
8. following the cattle raiders and trying to change their actions (புசல் மாற்று, pusan matru).
9. keeping the captured cattle safely in their villages (வியத்தல், vyttal).
10. pleasing their respective people [நூவல் வழித் தோற்றம்].
11. bringing the captured cows at the outskirts of the village (தந்துறிறை, tandunirai).
12. sharing of such cattle as per the king's order (பாதீடு, padhidu).
13. celebrating the occasion with their relatives with toddy (உண்டாட்டு, undattu).
14. giving away cows as gifts to supplicants (கொடை, kodai).

In Tolkappiyam there are 14 turais (sub-situations) describing seizures and 21 describing recovery of the cattle. This clearly shows that certain code of conduct was established in cattle raiding during the Sangam period and onwards, as found in the literature. Reference about cattle raiding and as well as about the importance of cow are given below side by side from the Tamil Sangam literature for later discussion.

⁵ V. R. Ramachandra Dhikshithar, *War in Ancient India*, MacMillan, New Delhi, 1944, see Cattle-raiding, pp.14-16.

⁶ Tolkappiyam, Purattinaiyiyal, Sutras – 56, 57 and 58.

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3.1. **Natrinai:** It describes about the cattle raid carried out by Tervan Malaiyan. He brought cattle from the land of enemy situated at the outskirts of his place by winning through a bow-fight⁷. The group that engaged in the cattle rearing were Ayar, Kovalar etc⁸. the suffering condition of a cow, which was tied at her head-side, thus, it neither could sleep nor stand in the muddy ground⁹, eating of crop by a cow that gave birth to a calf¹⁰, eating of jack fruit and drinking of water by a calf¹¹, the ringing bells of cattle¹², eating ambal flowers by a cow with calf and the rest by a bull, thrown on the fields by Mallar¹³, walking of cattle through a street covered with flowery particles and touching of their backs by the roots of a banyan tree¹⁴, a calf could not recognize her mother, as she roamed through kantal flower area, her colour was changed to red¹⁵, and the description of Ayar as the protectors of cows¹⁶ are other significant references about cattle.

3.2. **Kuruntogai:** Ezhini recaptured the cattle after a battle. The cattle keepers were Idaiyar. The other descriptions about cattle are: the waiting of calves for their mothers in the evenings, who went for grazing,; grazing of cows in the early morning when mist makes the Tali creepers fall down, licking of full grown trees by the cows as they could not eat; the cows in the forest of Nalli produce good quality of ghee; spilling of milk on the floor is neither benefiting her calf nor owner; the ringing of bell while the cow was turning head to drive a fly away and the ringing bell of cattle¹⁷.

3.3. **Ingurunuru:** The cattle breeders were Kovalar and they had many cattle. They had a pond with water specially meant for cattle¹⁸.

3.4. **Paditruppattu:** The Kongar had many cattle. Idaiyar's cows graze at fields. Uzhavar (farmers) made the cattle spread in their field. Peruncheral Irumporai captured many cattle and distributed (padidu) them among his warriors. Kadal Pirakkottiya Senguttuvan took rest at Irumbadavanam after capturing variety of cattle. Kazhuvul was the head of Kovalar¹⁹.

3.5. **Kalittogai:** It describes how cow naturally goes to the place where her calf is there, how bull tries to attract so many cows, how a cow caress a just born calf without leaving and how it gets angry when her calf is taken away from her²⁰.

⁷ Natrinai – 100: 7-9.

⁸ Ibid. 264:7-9; 68: 7-9; 240: 6-9.

⁹ Ibid.109: 6-9.

¹⁰ Ibid. 179:1-3.

¹¹ Ibid. 213: 2-5.

¹² Ibid. 264: 7-9; 364: 7-10; 37: 1-3; 67: 7-9.

¹³ Ibid. 290: 1-3.

¹⁴ Ibid. 343: 3-4.

¹⁵ Ibid. 359: 1-3.

¹⁶ Ibid. 249: 6-9.

¹⁷ Kuruntogai – 80: 5-7; 210: 6-8; 64: 1-4; 104: 3-4; 204:3-4; 210: 1-2, 27; 86: 2-6; 190: 4-7 and 275.

¹⁸ Ingurunuru – 87: 31, 37, 108: 48,49; 110: 12-15; 116: 8,9.

¹⁹ Paditruppattu – 22:15; 21: 20,21; 62: 13; 71: 13-15; 5: 2,0; 71: 12-15.

²⁰ Kalittogai – 81: 36,37; 108: 48,49; 110: 12-15; 116: 8,9.

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3.6. **Agananuru**: It gives more details about cattle raiding. Here, the cattle raiders are Kalvar, Mazhavar, Panar, Maravar and Vadugar. It also mentions about the beating of a big drum at the time of seizure of cattle from the enemies. The reference about capture of cattle and their bringing after defeating Maravar with arrows and bows and then celebration with pride, beating drum and dancing is very significant, as it exactly tallies with Tolkappiyam. Besides, there are hundreds of references about the nature and usage of cattle in the ancient Tamil society²¹.

3.7. **Purananuru**: In Puram, there are 17 verses (5 vetchi and 12 karandai) details the cattle raiding²². Particularly, it emphasizes that cows (or cattle) should not be killed during war, battle or cattle lifting. Nettimaiyar, the poet describes Pandiyan Palyagsalai Mudugudumi Peruvazhuthiyan as the protector of cows, parppar who have the nature of cows, women and sick. This verse repeats the same principle of Tolkappiyam²³. Before, two kings start their battle, these vulnerable groups should be removed and taken to safer places, as they could not protect themselves during such exigencies. As cattle are seized in the operations, sometimes, such actions are known as 'mittal karantai'. It also vividly gives the details of 'Nadukal' erected in the memory of the warriors, who lost their lives during their actions of cattle raiding.

3.8. **Porunatruppadai and Perumpanatruppadai**: It gives the following details: how a Maravan captured cattle from the enemies and gave away for getting toddy; how butter is taken from curd of a red colour cow²⁴; how Ay magal (cowherdress) churn butter out of sweet curd in the early morning; how a Ay magal buys good cows (Karunaga variety) with her earned income accrued by selling of butter-milk instead of buying gold (ornaments) etc²⁵. This clearly shows how cows were treated in the Sangam period for their wealth and progress of society.

3.9. **Maduraikkanchi**²⁶: As Nedunjezhiyan destroyed the lands of enemies, ferocious jungle-animals started living there. Madurai appeared like the world of gods with beauty, wealth, captured cattle and other things, glittering with the brightness of flames that engulfed the villages set on fire by the warriors, who

²¹ Agananuru – 7: 14,15; 35: 4-6; 52: 6; 56: 10-12; 64: 11-17; 79: 4-8; 113: 12-17; 129: 12; 131: 6-10; 156: 3-6; 214: 12; 239: 3-6; 240: 12-13; 253: 10-19; 262: 4-6; 309: 4-6; 309: 2-6; 342: 6-10; 369: 22-24; 372: 10-12; 340: 5-9; 165: 1-5; 168: 4,5; 264: 3-6; 338: 18,19; 393: 16-19; 395: 11-15.

²² Purananuru – 9: 1-6; 204: 7,8; 258: 10; 261: 1; 263: 5,6; 323: 1,2; 339: 1-3; 362: 8; 33: 2-6; 215: 1-5; 326: 9-12; 224: 13-16; 230: 1; 258: 2,3; 386: 12,13; 5: 1,3;

9: 1,5; 34: 1,6; 152: 27; 259: 5,6; 260: 15-21; 265: 2-5; 269: 9-12; 339: 1-3; 386: 5,6.

²³ Tolkappiyam, Purattinaiyiyal – 57. In deed, Puram 34: 1,6 says that there may be redemption for the sinner who cut away the udder of a cow, but not for the persons who killed gratitude.

²⁴ Pernatruppadai – 148-156.

²⁵ Perumpanatruppadai – 136-141; 136-141; 243, 244, 306, 162-165

²⁶ Maduraikkanchi – 157, 690-692, 697-699.

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captured the cattle by killing the centries. These are the details given by Maduraikanchi. Here, the burning down of the enemy's villages is very significant, as this has been mentioned as one of the stages of vetchi by Tolkappiyam²⁷.

3.10. From the above illustrative literary evidences, the consistency of the cattle raiding and the following of prescribed stages of vetchi as mentioned in Tolkappiyam can be noted. However, where a particular stage or stages is / are not given or described, it does not mean that there is deviation from the tradition or violation of code of conduct of vetchi of Tolkappiyam. In fact, the beating of drum to give warning, burning down of the villages of enemies, sharing of captured cattle, importance of cow in the social life and other details enumerated above only complement such scheme. If it were made poetic imagination and fantasy, cow would not have played a crucial role in the lives of ancient Tamils. Considering the chronological gap between Sangam literature and Tolkappiyam, the code of conduct of was developed and defined in the stages of vetchi, vanji, ulinji, tumbai and vahai, and their variations or modifications are only consistent with time and social changes, but not deviation from the tradition.

4. **Archaeological evidences:** One of the existing theories about the origin of South Indian megaliths is that the ancient Tamils were the builders of such megaliths. In deed, Vedic and Sangam literature give ample evidences to prove the association of megalithic culture with the cattle-usage society. At many excavated sites, cattle remains have been found. The occurrence of the remains of sheep, and cattle shows that the megalithic builders led a settled life and used animals both for farming and food. Their settled life goes against the nomadic nature of cattle-keepers, who were generally considered as so. The Maski evidence points to domestication of short-horn hump less variety of cattle²⁸. Apart from the actual bone remains, some of the megaliths have given figurines of animals, birds, and human beings. M. J. Wallhouse reports the find of miniature buffalo and human figures of clay in a cairn of Ralliyur on the Nilgiris²⁹. Cattle modeled in terracotta have been discovered at kulli and Piklihalli³⁰.

²⁷ B, K, Thapar, *Maski 1954: A Chalcolithic site of the Southern Deccan*, I Ancient India, ASI, New Delhi, No. 13, p.14.

The animal-remains from the period indicated the domestication of the cattle of the short-horned humpless variety of sheep. From the number of bones, however, it is evident that not large stocks were raised. The inhabitants seem to have practiced settled agricultural economy with a bias for urban life. Hunting as a part-occupation is suggested by the occurrence of stone ball, presumably used for the purpose as in the preceding period (above, p.13)

²⁸ Soundararajan, Seminar Papers, 1969, pp.6-9 ff.

Subba Rao, *Transactions of the Archaeological Society of South India*, Silver Jubilee Volume, 1982, pp.132-151.

Haimendrof, Presidential address, Indian Science Congress, Poona, 1950.

²⁹ Indian Antiquary, Vol.II, 1873, pp.275-278.

³⁰ R. R. Allchin, *Neolithic Cattle-keepers of South India*, p.160, 162.

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4.1. Allchin opined³¹ that though over 200 specimens of cattle bones were identified, it is not clear whether this indicates the presence of two separate breeds, one milch variety and the other used for transport and ploughing purposes³². The cattle may be identified as at Piklihalli and Maski as normal *Bos Indicus*. The samples of charcoal and bone show that they belong to a period of 4120 YBP \pm 150 or 2160 \pm 150 BCE³³. He has reported that cattle bone were available in ash-mounds also. He mentions about the driving of cattle through bone fires by Mahadev kolis of Bombay, Gonds and Ahirs of Mandla and Gollas of Andhrapradesh. He establishes that the ash mounds mark the sites of Neolithic cattle-pens and that periodically accumulated dung in the pens was burnt. The burnings were the result of the some sort of purposeful activity. Every year at the time of the seasonal migrations, a bone fire ceremony took place in the Neolithic pens. Probably, the ceremony involved the cattle being driven through a moderate fire of dung, lighted in the centre of the pen. It would be regarded as auspicious, particularly when the pen was in deed of reconstruction, if the resulting fire got out of control and caught the whole mass of dung. The bones which recovered were almost all from the living areas and they were mostly cut up as if for purposes of food, just as at other permanent Neolithic settlement. Though he quoted about the cattle riding references from Tolkappiyam, Pattuppattu and Ettuttogai, he did not think in the lines of tradition of the ancient Tamil culture.

5. **Burning of Cattle-pens:** Tolkapiyam specifically mentions the burning of villages of enemies as one of the fourteen stages involved in vetchi or cattle raiding. Maduraikanchi also vouchsafe such prevalent practice. Therefore, after raiding and capture of cattle, when the villages were set on fire, the cattle-pens and the accumulated cow-dung might have also been caught in fire and razed to ground. As such places were inhabited continuously for thousands of years, different layers were formed with embedded intervening ash accumulation. Before the attack, the warriors warn the enemies and remove the cattle from the sheds according to the code of vetchi. Therefore, no cattle would have died during the burning down of villages or cattle-pens. The archaeological evidences available also do not point out that any cattle were burnt alive. Moreover, as the Neolithic people were earlier to megalithic people as is evidenced from the tazhis (urns used for burials) discovered at various places in Tamilnadu, the nomadic nature of the Neolithic people have to be proved. But, when the Neolithic people of Tamilnadu led a settled life, they could not be treated as nomadic. In deed, the neolithic age of South India has been named as “Neolithic-chalcolithic Age”, characterized by houses built by mud or clay covered with leaves and reed type grass, basement of the walls with clay and shapes of such houses were square, circle and rectangle³⁴. The question of migration of people and cattle does not

³¹ Ibid, p.45

³² Ibid, p.46.

³³ Ibid, p.46.

³⁴ S. Gurumurthy, *Archaeology and Tamil Culture*, Madras University, Madras, 1974, pp.18-20.

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arise in such conditions. Therefore, the ash mounds and the ash deposits may be considered as the remnants of the cattle-pens burnt down by the vetchi warriors during their cattle raids consistent with the tradition, culture and heritage of the ancient Tamils. In deed, nadukal erected in the memory of killed vetchi warriors also support such view. And epigraphical evidences are abundant in this regard.

6. Cow-sacrificers and cow-eaters: Several references about sacrificing and eating of cows are found in Sanga literature. Agananuru specifically mentions that Mazhavat ate beef³⁵. Mazhavar sacrificed a cow captured by them under a neem tree where a goddess supposedly resided and splashed the blood around. Then, they ate its flesh. But, this does not mean that if one group sacrificed cow and ate beef, other groups should not protect cows. For the people of Mullai, viz., Idaiyar, Ayar, Kovalar and Antar, the cattle breeding was their occupation on their pasture and lands, whereas, the people of Palai, viz., Maravar, Mallar, Mazhavar and Kallar captured or killed cows and ate their flesh according to their food practice prevalent in the dry table lands. This is absolutely consistent with the culture of ancient Tamils. Otherwise, it would not have been mentioned in the same collection of poems that cows should not be killed, because they were incapable of protecting themselves. The Vedic names aghnya (not to be killed), ahi (not to be slain), and aditi (not to be cut into pieces) used for cow clearly shows that it should not be killed. Similarly, the Tamil names used for cow are **A, An, Avu, Apinam, Anirai, Avinam, Antirai** etc., convey that they should not be killed but protected by the king, like other weaker sections of the society. Moreover, as the importance of cow was very much felt in the ancient Tamil life, their protection was also equally important for the survival of the society.

7. Cattle raiding in north India: The cattle raiding examples of Vedic, Epic and Puranas are too familiar to be repeated here. It is called as gograhana in Sanskrit literature. The Arthasastra also contains specific references to it. The cow based Vedic rituals and rites, and daily life of the ancient Indians clearly show its importance. According to the number of possession of cattle, one's wealth was considered in those days. If the cattle raiding played an economic role in the case of ordinary citizens, it was politically used to provoke the opponents and enemies to come to battle fields. But, in all such raids, strict rules were imposed so that the cattle should not be injured or subjected to any cruel acts. In fact, in Vedic context, cow was considered as devata or goddess and abode of all Gods including Indian Trinity. When we compare the cattle raiding of north and south, we can easily understand the underlying similarity of concept and unity of the respective people.

7.1. The study of Sangam literature also gives the same picture. In other words, irrespective of the linguistic and even racial differences, as certain group of Tamil scholars and historians started to interpret people as "Aryans" and "Dravidians," they were following the same type of culture related to cattle. Incidentally, the

³⁵ Agananuru – 129:12; 249: 12-13.

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cattle lifting, stealing, capture, raid etc., had been linked with chariots and hence horses. However, one group of historians assert that the people group of IVC at peak period 2250 – 1950 BCE, did not have horse and hence chariot also. Whether, the people group of Sangam period dated to c.300 BCE had horses and chariots is not known. “Goharana” ritual and festival conducted and performed required chariots and the chariot-makers were respected. There is an idol of Goharana at Surat and some archaeologists interpret that the idol might represent Mokhadaji [1309-1347 CE] of Gohil, Kolis people of cattle. Though, hero-stones have been associated with the cattle-raiding and recovery, most of them, were found in the South India and nothing in the Ganges Valley region, where Vedic civilization was dominant. Again, most of the hero-stones found in the Tamilnadu have been associated with the cattle-raiding and recovery³⁶. M. D. Sampath pointed out that such cattle skirmishes were recorded in the 8th – 10th CE inscriptions of Banas, Gangas, Vaidumabas and Nolambas. This coincides with the “Neolithic cattle keepers” of South India.

8. Conclusion: From the above discussion of literary, anthropological and archaeological evidences in connection with the cattle raiding, it is seen that it was carried out in south India consistent with the tradition of the ancient Tamils.

- ⇒ The literary evidences point to a codified conduct, mandatory for the cattle raiders.
- ⇒ The literary evidences also tally with the inscriptional evidences.
- ⇒ From the highlighted importance of cow in the ancient Tamil society, it is also stressed about the protection of cow by the rulers as per the guidelines expounded in the Sangam literature itself.
- ⇒ The Sangam literature evidences clearly show how cow formed part and parcel of the ancient Tamil society covering all social and political processes.
- ⇒ The comparison of cattle raiding of north and south also proves the underlying unity and integrity of the culture of India, in spite of social changes and composition of the ancient Indians.
- ⇒ The importance of cow felt in the ancient Tamil society, as well as the entire South India, also proves the unity of India on the basis of tradition, culture and heritage.
- ⇒ No racial aspect is found in such processes in South India with the people groups involved.

³⁶ B. Ranganatha, *Hero-stones of South India with special reference to Tamilnadu*, A PhD thesis submitted, University of Madras, Madras, 1979.