

VELLALAS OF TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

Vellalar is a Tamil Caste found mainly in the Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and in North Eastern parts of Sri Lanka. They are traditionally involved in agriculture also serving as landlords. Vellalar, is a generic term used by several agricultural communities, including the numerically strong kongu Vellalar, Chozhia Vellalar, Thuluva Vellalar and Sri Lankan Vellalar. Despite being a relatively lowly group, they were dominant communities in Tamil Agrarian Societies for 600 years until the decline of the Chola Empire in the 13th Century

Key Words: *Vellalar, Thuluva Vellalar, Sri Lankan Vellalar, Pillais, Mudaliar.*

Introduction

The word Vellalar may come from the root Vellam for flood, which gave rise to various rights of land, and it is because of the acquisition of land rights that the Vellalar got their name. The earliest reference to the name is attested in Tolkappiyam, which divided the society in four classes Arasar, Andanar, Vanigar and Vellalar. The Vellalars have a long cultural history that goes back to over to millennia in Southern India, where once they were the ruling and land-owning community.

Vellalar and Jainism

Most of the Tamil Jains are from the Vellalar social group at present. Also, the Saiva Vellalar sect are originally believed to have been Jainas before they embraced Hinduism. The Tamil Jains refer to the Saiva Vellalar as nir puci nayanars, or nir puci Vellalars meaning the Vellalars who left Jainism by smearing the sacred ash. While some of the Jains assign this conversion to the period of the Bhakthi Movement in Tamil Nadu others link it to a conflict with a ruler of the Vijayanagar empire in the 15th Century. The Villages and areas settled by the Saiva Vellalar even now have a small number of jaina families and inscriptional evidence indicate that these were earlier jaina settlements as is evident by the existence of old jaina temple.

Vellalar and Mudaliar

In ancient times, cultivation in South India was spread by force, people would move into virgin land which was used by tribal people for slash and burn agriculture or for hunting and convert it into prime agricultural land. These raids were organized and carried out by chieftains, feudal lords and agricultural land lords and inhabitants of Marutha nilam. Mudaliar, like pillai is a title conferred upon prominent Vellalar chieftains and feudal lords by the king depending upon the Tamil Kingdom. More specifically, the Vellalars of Thondaimandalam or Pallava Kingdom were given the title of Mudaliar, while the Vellalars of Pandya and Chola Kindoms were given.

Vellalar and Thuluvar

The Agam Udayar from Mukkulathor community, which also includes the Kallar and Maravars, Migrated towards the northern part of Tamil Nadu. settled there, changed their caste name to Thuluva Vellala. So, in reality Thuluva Vellalar is just the renaming of Agam Udayar and hence are classified as one by the Tamil Nadu Government, India. So, inter mingling of on a large scale between two district communities is very unlikely and has no historical evidence.

Sub divisions of Vellala

The Vellalar are strongly represented in Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Kerala. They are divided into several sub-castes like Tontaimantala Vellalas, Karkattar Vellalas, Saiva Vellalas, Nangudi Vellalas, Pandiya Vellalas, Tuluva Vellalas, Choliya Vellalas, Nanchilnattu Vellalas, Kongu Vellalas, Chetti Vellals, Mudaliar Vellals, Choliya Vellalas, Sri Lankan Vellalar etc

Religious beliefs of Vellalas

A small minority of Vellalar are Christian, via individual conversion rather than mass conversion of an entire sub caste. The majority are Hindu, and the operative principles of Hinduism pervade all spheres of life and activity. Although there is a division between shaivites and Vaishnavites there is no bar on intermarriage. While squarely within the orthodox Hindu tradition, the Vellala look to Tamil indigenous forms in devotion, metaphysics and philosophy. The Vellala also maintain traditional link to the classical temples as trustees, donors and receivers of Temple honors.

Conclusion

The Vellalas have a long cultural history that goes back to over two millennia in Southern India, where once they were ruling and land-owning community. The Vellalars are one of the tribe's claiming ancestries from the aristocratic velir chieftains. The Sangam literature describes the Vellalar tribes a landed gentry who irrigated the wet land and the Karalar as the landed gentry in the dry land. According to the anthropologist Kathleen Gough "the Vellalars were the dominant secular aristocratic caste under the Chola kings, providing the countries, most of the army officers, the lower rank of the kingdom's bureaucracy, and the upper layer of the peasantry".

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