

CHAPTER 7

THE VILLAGES OF SOUTH INDIA

(Talaichchangadu village - 950 to 1250 AD)

In this chapter we will read the story of a very old village. How people lived there in the beginning - what changes took place - what were the problems of the people - how they solved them, etc. To begin with, take a look at the pictures of this chapter and discuss what you can learn from them about the history of that village.



Fig. 1 Meeting of the *Ur* council

The most important task in administering a kingdom was the collection of taxes from the people. In the reign of the earlier kings like Ajatashatru and Ashoka, this work was done by the king's officials. The officials handed over the taxes they collected to the king. In return, they were paid a regular salary.

After 700 AD, the kings of North India began granting villages and towns to their relatives and officials. You must have read about this practice in the previous chapter. These grantees or *bhogpatis* collected taxes from the people of the villages awarded to them, but did not hand these over to the king. Instead, they kept the money with themselves as they did not receive any regular salary from the king.

In South India, the method of collecting taxes was different. Let us examine the system

prevalent there to understand the difference.

Ur and *Nadu*

About 1000 years ago, the villages of Tamil Nadu were organised in a certain manner. Each village had a council of farmers known as the *ur*. Its members were drawn from the most important families in the village.

The *ur* looked after the administration of the village - settling quarrels among people, punishing law breakers and criminals, keeping land records, distributing the waters from the irrigation canals and so on. It also undertook another important task - collecting taxes from the farmers on behalf of the king.

In South India, it was the *ur* council of farmers which collected taxes from the farmers and handed these over to the king.

- *What were the differences in the method of collecting taxes between North India and South India? Outline these differences in two sentences.*

In those days there also existed another council. It was called the *nadu*.

There was a *nadu* for every 20-25 villages. It was made up of the most prominent farmers from all these villages. The *nadu* looked after the overall administration of its group of villages, settling their quarrels and so on.

If the king wanted any work done in the villages he used to get it done through the *ur* or the *nadu*. These councils carried out the orders of the king.

During his reign, emperor Ashoka used the services of his officials to get all his work done and also to collect taxes from the people. However, the South Indian kings of the period between 700 and 1200 AD employed very few officials. Most of the work in the villages was done by the *ur* or *nadu*. The king did not pay any salary to the members of the *ur* or *nadu*, nor did he appoint members to these councils.

- *Underline those sentences which explain the work of the *nadu*.*
- *The committee of each village was called the*

- *The council of a group of villages was called the*
- *The members of the *ur* depended upon for their livelihood.*
- *What were the differences between the king's officials and the members of the *ur*?*

Vellala Farmers and Pariah Labourers

Councils like the *ur* and *nadu* were found in the villages along the banks of the Kaveri river. Most of the farmers in these villages belonged to the *vellala* caste. The labourers who worked in their fields were generally of the *pariah* caste. *Pariah* labourers were regarded as untouchables and had to live outside the boundaries of the village.

The villages of the Kaveri delta were very fertile and yielded two to three crops of rice every year. Thus some of the *vellala* farmers were very rich and powerful. They had considerable influence over the *urs* and *nadus* of the region.

Sometimes, the importance of the *ur* and the *vellala* farmers was undermined. This happened when the king donated villages to the brahmins.

You may remember that in those days kings used to invite brahmins to settle down in their kingdoms. They offered them villages in

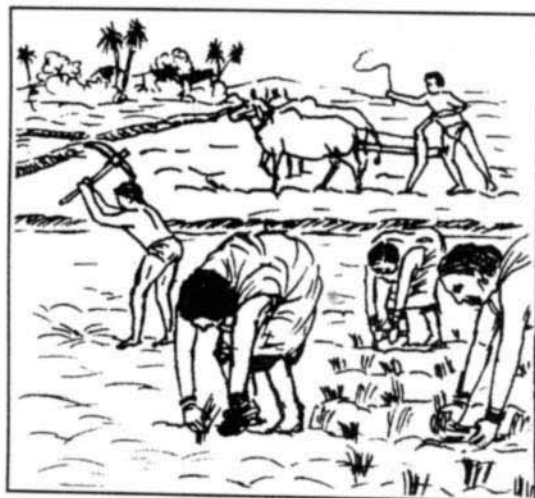


Fig. 2 There are two pictures of Talaichangadu here. What differences can you observe in them?

donation. Many brahmins were settled in this manner in the Kaveri delta. When villages were donated to the brahmins, what happened to their administrative system? How did the *ur* and *nadu* then function? To find out, let us look at the example of Talaichchangadu village.

- *The vellalas were*
- *The pariahs were*

Talaichchangadu is gifted to the Brahmins

Around 950 AD, the ruling king of the Chola dynasty donated the prosperous Talaichchangadu village to several brahmins. The king ordered the *nadu* of that area to make the necessary arrangements to transfer the village to the brahmins. The king's order was complied with by the *nadu*. As a result, the *vellala* peasants no longer remained the owners of their land. These lands now belonged to the brahmins.

Several brahmin families settled down in Talaichchangadu. They distributed the land amongst themselves. The *vellala* farmers now became their sharecroppers. They had to give a large portion of their harvest to the brahmins. On irrigated lands this share amounted to two thirds of the crop while on unirrigated lands it was half the crop. The brahmins also forced these peasants to work for them without paying them any wages.

- *What share of the harvest do sharecroppers in your area get today?*

The brahmins also took over the administration of the village. The *ur* was disbanded. In its place, the brahmins formed their own council called the *mulapurusha sabha*. The important brahmins of the village became members of the *sabha* in rotation.

The task of collecting taxes from the villagers and handing these over to the king was also taken over by the *mulapurusha sabha*.

- *What changes took place in Talaichchangadu after 950 AD.? Underline four sentences which refer to these important changes.*

The Temples of Talaichchangadu

In those days there were three large temples in Talaichchangadu which were famous in the region. Two were Shiva temples while the third was a Vishnu temple. Many people made offerings of gold, silver and land to these temples. In this manner, the temples collected considerable wealth and became rich.

Around 1000 AD these temples were rebuilt in stone. As time passed, they expanded even further. They began employing various kinds of people - priests, dancers, singers, drummers, watermen, cooks, gardeners, etc. The expenditure on all these employees was met through the income from the temple lands. The temples also paid taxes on their land to the king. These taxes were collected from the temples by the *mulapurusha sabha*.

The Mulapurusha Sabha and the Village

In 1006 AD the brahmins decided to organise summer festival every year in the Shiva temple of the village. But from where would they get the money to hold such an

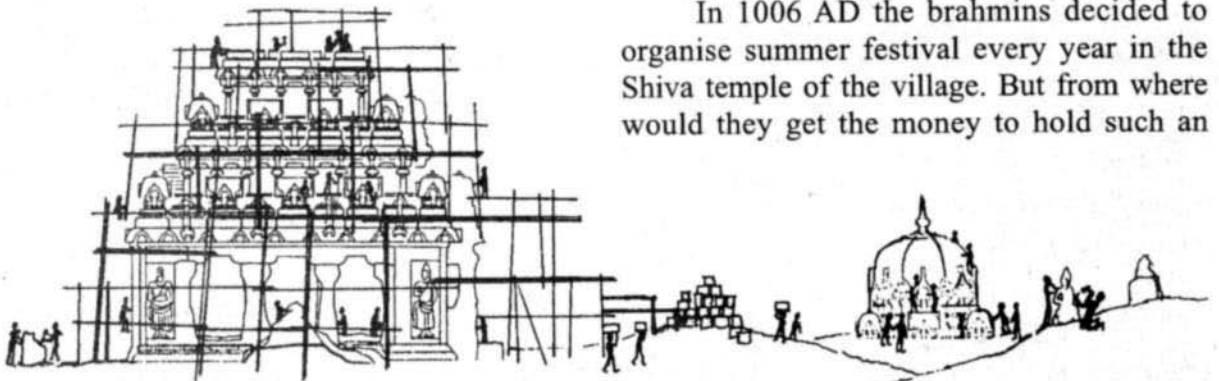


Fig. 3 Temples were built of stone

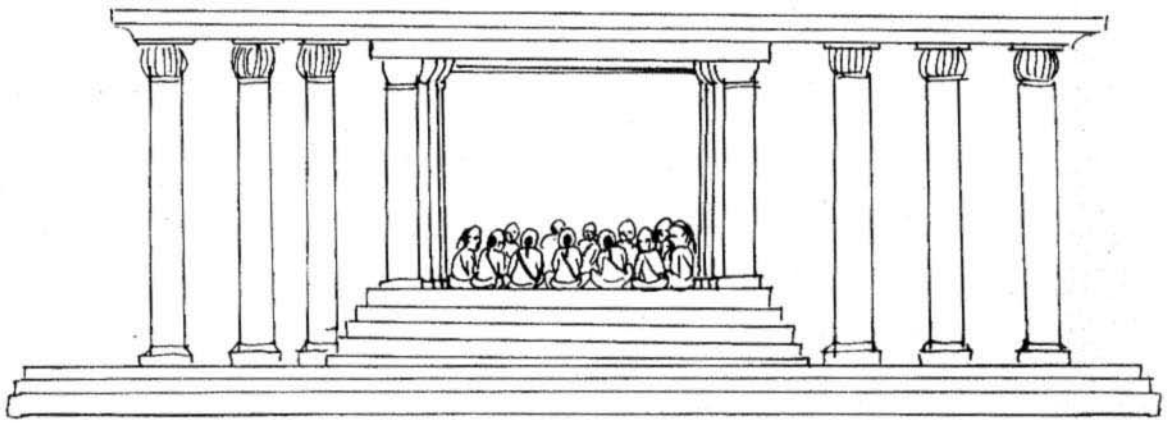


Fig. 4 Meeting of the *Mulapurusha Sabha*

annual event? The *mulapurusha sabha* decided to exempt some of the temple lands from paying tax, saying, “We will pay the tax to the king ourselves. The money thus saved each year can be used for organising the harvest festival.” In this way the cost of the festival was met.

Some time later, the *mulapurusha sabha* decided to feed 10 brahmins every day at the Vishnu temple. To meet the expense, the members of the *sabha* donated 100 gold coins to the temple. They collected these coins from the village artisans - 7 coins each from the carpenters, the goldsmiths and the blacksmiths, 3.5 coins from the washermen and 35 coins from the liquor distillers. They added the balance themselves and gave the total amount to the temple.

- ***Underline two sentences in the section above which tell us about the authority exercised by the mulapurusha sabha over the village.***
- ***In North India, to whom were similar powers delegated by the king?***

Settling Quarrels and Giving Punishment

The *mulapurusha sabha* also undertook to settle quarrels and mete out punishment and justice to the villagers.

Once a quarrel arose between some brahmins and the temple committee. Four brahmins had begun cultivating a piece of village land. The temple committee claimed

that this land belonged to the Shiva temple. It said that a stone with the *trishul* emblem of the temple marked the boundary of the temple lands and the four brahmins had secretly uprooted this stone and thrown it away. However, the four brahmins claimed that the land was theirs and that the accusations of the temple committee were false. The controversy burgeoned.

To prove the temple’s right over the land, one of its employees immolated himself. In those days it was believed that anyone who was prepared to sacrifice his own life to prove a claim could only be speaking the truth.

When matters reached this stage, the *mulapurusha sabha* consulted the documents in their possession. These documents showed that the land did belong to the temple.

The *mulapurusha sabha*, therefore, ordered the brahmins to return the land to the temple. As a punishment they were ordered to install a bronze image of the servant who had committed suicide in the temple. They were also made to donate some of their land to the temple to cover the cost of offering regular *pujas* to that image.

Pressure on the Brahmin *Sabhas* from the *Nadus*

It is true that the *mulapurusha sabha* of the brahmins had total authority over Talaichangadu village. But this did not mean

that the *sabha* always had its way. After all, the *nadu* of the region continued to function and, apart from Talaichchangadu, the other villages were still under the control of the *vellala* peasants. Thus the *nadu* could exercise pressure on the *mulapurusha sabha* to prevent it from doing as it pleased.

Once such a situation did arise. The brahmins of Talaichchangadu decided to reduce the sharecroppers' share of the harvest. The sharecroppers, who were all *vellala* peasants, refused to accept this decision. The brahmins then got their servants to go to the houses of their sharecroppers, destroy their possessions and beat them up.

This state of affairs continued for several years. Eventually, the farmers of Talaichchangadu placed their problem before the *nadu* of the region. The *nadu* decided that the atrocities of the brahmins should not be borne in silence. It warned all the brahmin *sabhas* in the area that if they did not reach a just and proper settlement with their sharecroppers soon, then these sharecroppers

would stop ploughing their fields and leave the village.

The brahmins finally had to climb down. They agreed to continue to give their *vellala* sharecroppers the same share of the harvest that they had been receiving earlier, before the trouble started.

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From these examples we learn that councils of farmers or brahmins managed much of the administration of the villages of South India. The king's officials and appointees did not have much influence in these villages.

We come across many such incidents connected with the villages of olden days. In South India it was customary to inscribe the details of such incidents on the walls of the temples. If you go to Talaichchangadu today, you can see the same Shiva temple that existed one thousand years ago. The details of the incidents we have referred to earlier are all inscribed on its walls. If you know Tamil you could even read these inscriptions.

EXERCISE

1. Who were the members of the *Ur*? What was their work?
2. Two episodes are mentioned below. You have to identify which one of them is set in north India and which one is in south India. Give reasons for your answer.
 - a. One day Rajaputra Lakhanapala visited Naddulai village. He called a meeting of all the villagers and asked them to pay one measure of wheat per plough for the performance of some rituals in the local temple.
 - b. One day a messenger from the king's court came to the village. He went to the council of the farmers and gave them the message of the king. The message was, "The temple of your village is not being properly looked after. You should make some arrangements so that the temple can get enough money for the rituals." The committee of farmers then decided to pay one silver coin for every plough to the temple.
3. The *mulapurusha sabha* used to collect taxes from Talaichchangadu village and hand it over to the king. Write three sentences about the event from which you learn about this practice.
4. The artisans of the village were subject to the authority of the *mulapurusha sabha*. Which event tells you about this?
5. These days the disputes relating to land and property are dealt with by the civil court - in ancient south Indian villages, where were these disputes resolved?
6. What prevented brahmin landlords from acting arbitrarily with the *Vellala* sharecroppers in Talaichchangadu village?
7. How do we know about the events of Talaichchangadu village from 950 to 1250 AD?