

**Glimpses of Tirunelveli from the Light of Epigraphical Sources**

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**Abstract**

The aim of this Paper is to describe references about the Tirunelveli from the inscriptions found on the walls of Nellaiyapper temple at Tirunelveli town. Tirunelveli the headquarter of Tirunelveli District is situated six hundred and two kilometers south of Madras.<sup>1</sup> Professor K. A. Neelakandasastri, says inscriptions are the most copious and authentic source of Indian History Particularly of South Indian History including Tirunelveli. Epigraphy, the study of inscription is the most copious and important source of information about the history and culture of the people of the by gone ages. It is trust worthy source too, Inscriptions found on the walls and pillars of the temple throw light on the contemporary political, social, economic and religious conditions. By this way throw the light of epigraphical sources attempt is made to describe history of Tirunelveli in this article. Tirunelveli is situated on the northern lower vally of Thamiraparani river.

**Key words :** Tirunelveli District, Inscriptions, Nellaiyapper temple, Pandyas, Cholas

**Introduction**

Tirunelveli District is one of the earliest settlements of Tamil Nadu. Tirunelveli the headquarters of Tirunelveli district situated on the banks of river Thambiraparani. The small town of Tirunelveli, which was once the capital of Pandyas has a history that goes back 2019 years. Tirunelveli is located six hundred and twenty kilometers south of Madras the capital city of Tamil Nadu state<sup>2</sup>.

**Etymology of the District**

When the British consolidated their possessions in the Carnatic and demarcated it into viable administrative divisions, the districts came into being on acquisition from the Nawab of Arcot in 1801 the British named Tirunelveli district as Tinnevely district though their head quarters was first located in Palayamkottai the adjacent town, where they had their military headquarters during their operations against the Poligars of the South on behalf of the Nawab. Tirunelveli was a chief town of the Pandyas to the South of their capital<sup>3</sup>. During the Nayaks period (1530 – 1739) it became the capital of their southern province since then it was known as Tirunelveli Seemai<sup>4</sup>.

### **Puranic Association**

Tirunelveli Sthalapurana prescribes a tradition for the origin of the name Tirunelveli<sup>5</sup>. In the antiquity the Sthalapurana says that the earlier name of Tirunelveli was Venuvanam which was a bamboo forest where the Lord Siva married his consort Gowri, other names of Tirunelveli according to sthalapurana are Thirumoorthipuram, Ibpuri, Tharanisaram and Sakalasimi. The author of the Puranic works equates Tirunelveli to that of Kancheepuram in Sacredness and calls it as Thenkanchi<sup>6</sup> other shortened names to refer Tirunelveli are Nellai. Nellaiyempathy and Nellaiyambalam.<sup>7</sup> According to sthalapurana Venuvanam came to be called Tirunelveli or sacred Paddy hedge on account of a miracle performed by Lord Siva by the protecting the Paddy of his devotee Vedasarma from rains by himself forming a hedge around it (Nelveli) with the addition of an honorific adjunct Thiru to Nelveli, to town came to be known as Tirunelveli<sup>8</sup>. In the Common Parlance of English, It was called Tinnevelly and was used as such by the Colonial British Government in their records and documents. In the Devaram hymns generally ascribed to seventh century A.D. there are references about Tirunelveli. ThiruGanasambandars versification of the Presiding of the Tirunelveli town found in the Devaram hymns.

Tirunelveli district situated on the upper and lower valley of Thamiraparani river sustained and fostered an ancient civilization for more centuries than men can remember. The historical places of Adichanallur Korkai, Palayakayal, Keyalpattnam, Ottappidaram, Pasuvanathanai, Murappanadu,<sup>9</sup> Maramangalam,, Agaram, Cheranmahadevi, Valuthur KilAmbur<sup>10</sup>, Tirunelveli, Kunnathur Potthai, Thenmalai, Mangudi, Old Courtallam, Ilanj, Kilnatham, Vasudevanallur, Alwarkurichi and Rajakkalmangalam. Speak the historical antiquity and soil fertility of the Tirunelveli District. Archaeologically this particular region is very important and is represented an ancient civilization.

Archaeological site Kunathur pottel is situated in the south western side of Tirunelveli town. It speaks the historical antiquity of Tirunelveli. In the early past Tirunelveli town was a bamboo forest under the rule of Pandya of Manappadaiveedu. Hence it was known in those days as venuvanam. According to Sthalapurana of the Nellaiyapper temple, Venuvanam came to be called as Tirunelveli on account of a miracle performed by Lord Siva by Protecting the Paddy of a devotee named Vedasarman from being washed away by rain by building a hedge around it. Nelveli with the addition of the adjunct, Thiru came to the known as Tirunelveli. From Sangam period to ninth century A.D. Tirunelveli was ruled by the Pandyas from Madurai and Korkai.

In the age of Sangam Tirunelveli region had been considered as a country and has a part of the Pandya Kingdom.<sup>11</sup> It is worthy that the Pandya Kingdom was vast and spacious. It has its boundary upto Kanyakumari in the South, Vaigai river in the north western Ghats in the West and Bay of Bengal in the east from this one can inform that the Tirunelveli country and it is one of the subdivision known as Thoothukudi was located on the east coast of Gulf of Mannar. Thoothukudi is situated fifteen miles north of Korkai the second capital of Pandya as well as the Yuvaraja seat and Port city of Pandya. The Southern TamilNadu including the erstwhile Tirunelveli district was the land of the Pandyas from the beginning of the sangam age of TamilNadu History upto the rise of imperial cholas. However they re-conquered it after the heydays of the Cholas were over. The early Pandyas were identified with the pearls and the Korkai port.

The Pandyas were one of the oldest dynasties having the privilege of having a continuous history upto sixteenth Century A.D. The name Pandya is derived from the word Pandu which means ancient. The ancient epics the Ramayana and Mahabharatha refer to them. Megesthenese and

Kautilya (326 B.C.) have written about them in their books. The Asoker edicts mention them along with other crowned rulers. If the word *punt* mentioned in the brew text is equated with the word *Pandya* their antiquity gets well attested. The *Pandya*s had trade link with Rome. *Iraiyana*r *Ahapporul* provides detailed information about the establishment of three *Sangams* by the *Pandya*s. The Period ranging from *Kaisinavaludis* to that of *Kadungon* coincides with the period of the first *Sangam*. The capital city was *Thenmadurai Venterseliyan* was the founder of the second *Sangam* which was in *Kapadapuram* the then capital of *Pandya*s. It Survived upto the rule of *Mudattirumaran*. The first two capitals were engulfed by the sea. *Mudattirumaran* shifted his capital and the Third *Sangam* to *Madurai* on the banks of river *Vaigai*. Since the *Pandya*s ruled Southern most Part of the *Tamil* country, they were called *Thenavan*, *Valuthi* and *Maran* were some of their title. Their emblem was fish. Among the *Pandya*s, *VadivalambaNintra Pandyan*, *Palyagasalaimudukudumi Peruvaluthi*, *Mudathirumaran*, *Kadalulmaintha - Elamperuvaluthi*, *Arivudainambi*, *Ollaiyurthantha Bhoothapandyan*, *Ariyapadaikadantha Nedunchezhiyen*, *Chithramadathu Thunjiya Nanmaran*, *Thalaiyalanganathu Seruventra Nedunchezhiyan* and *Kanapperayil Kadantha Ukkiraperuvaluthi* were the *Pandya* rulers of the ruled the *Tirunelveli* region.<sup>12</sup>

The early *Pandya* power or *sangam Pandya* power began to decline due to the rise of *Pallavas* of *Kanchi* in the fourth century A.D. and Due to invasion of the *Kalabhras*. According to the *Korramangalam* inscription of *Nandhivarman Kalabhras* became the traditional enemies of *Pallavas*. They were driven from *Kanchi* by early *Pallavas*. *Kalabhras* ruled over *TamilNadu* upto sixth century A.D. According to the *Velvigudi* grant the *Pandya* ruler of *Korkai Kadungon* liberated the *Pandya Nadu* from the *Kalabhras* rule in 570 A.D.<sup>13</sup>

After the *Virapandya* (940 – 966) *Tirunelveli* came under the rule of *Cholas*. *Cholas* ruled upto 1190 A.D. From 1190 A.D. to 1735 A.D. *Tirunelveli* was ruled by the later *pandya*s. *Tenkasi Pandya*s and *Madurai Nayaks*. Then it came under the rule of *Arcot Nawabs* from 1735 to 1801 and *British* rule from 1801 to 1947.

There are about one hundred inscriptions in *Tirunelveli* town alone identified and copied upto the year 1912.<sup>14</sup> Among the one hundred inscriptions the earliest inscriptions belong to the second regnal year 766 A.D. of *Varaguna I* alias *Maranjadaiyen* (768 – 815 A.D.) found on the north wall of *Narasimhaperumal* temple situated in the west *Madastreet* of *Nellaiyapper* temple records a gift of cows made by *Sattanambi* on behalf of *SattenDeyem* a *devaradiyal* of *Tirunelveli* in *Kilvembanadu* for a lamp in the temple of *Brahmapurittavar* at *Tirunelveli*. *Ettijatavedan* a *Vettigudi* under took to burn the lamp.<sup>15</sup>

During the reign of *ArikesariMaravarman* alias *NinrasirNedumaran* (640 – 6470 A.D.) *Saivasaint ThiruGanasambandar* visited the *Tirunelveli* and sung in Praise of *Tirunelveli*. *Virapandya* was (946 – 966 A.D.) the son of *Rajasimha II* (900 – 946) fourth regnal year 950 A.D.<sup>16</sup> and seventh regnal year (953 A.D.)<sup>17</sup> inscriptions found on the west wall and north wall of the *MulaMahalingar Shrine* in the *Nellaiyapper* temple seems to record a gift to the *Permanadigal* alias *Nellaiyapper* temple by *Manikkam Battelakon* of *idaikkarai* in *Mungudinadu* in memory of his mother *Ettinili* and *Vidaiyangadival* alias *Tikaiyen Tanichchai* of *Tavalur Turaikudi* in *Mungudinadu* granted fifty sheep for burning perpetual lamp in the *Nellaiyapper* temple. The sheep were received by a *Padaittalaivan* called *ChattenTirunelveli* with *ChendanBataran Brahmapriyapperunai* being his

surety. The above said inscription mentioned Tirunelveli and Nellaiyapper temple were administered by the Padaittalaivan.

Virapandyas fifteenth regnal year related to the 961 A.D, inscription found on the north wall of Mulamahalingar shrine records gift of fifty sheep for a perpetuallamp to the Perumanadigal at Tirunelveli by Attirayen Mayuravhananchendon of Kummanamangalam a brahmadeya in Kilvembunadu. Twenty five of the sheep were to be given Tirumalchatten an army officer for supply of Kadarattuchachula-Ulaku ghee. Another army officer Kurungudiykummanaviran stood surety to the above person. Another fifteenth regnal year 961 A.D. inscription of Virapandya found on the west wall of the Mahalingar Shrine records gift of twenty five sheep for a perpetual lamp to be burnt before the deity perumanadigal by a Cholaichediorri a Vellala of Tirunelveli. The Sheep were received by Chendamagalavan an army officer to whom Punitunaiyakki stood as surety.<sup>18</sup> After the eclipse of First Pandya empire the Cholas asserted their power in TamilNadu including Tirunelveli. RajaRaja Chola Ist (985 – 1014 A.D.) twelfth regnal year 997 A.D. inscription found on the south wall of Narasimhaperumal temple seems to register a gift of land by Narayanan Tukkodi of Chopuram for providing offerings to the god Brahmaपुरidevar at Tirunelveli.<sup>19</sup> Rajendra Chola Ist, (1012 – 1044) eighth regnal year 1020 A.D. inscription found on two Pillars of the Mandapa on the South side of the large shrine in the Nellaiyapper temple records a new arrangement made the Adhikerikal Biramma Srikilar who was enquiring into the services in the temple of Tirunelveli for the supply of Camphor, Sandal etc., to the temple by the Valadin Jeyer of the place who had the Kani rights of some of temple lands in Kannanur. The Velanjeyer were required to pay 22 Kasu perma per day towards the due Chirappilkudimai on the lands.<sup>20</sup> Kulotunga Chola Ist ascending year 1070 A.D. inscription found on the north wall of the Sastralinga shrine on the north side of the second prakara in the Nellaiyapper temple records arrangements to reclaim some portions of lands in Tirukunrattur a devadana of Tirunelveli Udaiyar temple which remained uncultivated. The lands were made over to the Sabha Uttamachola Chaturvedimangalam in Kilkalakkurram for cultivation. The Sabha was required to the temple four Kasu and four Kalam of Paddy per crop per ma.<sup>21</sup> Eighteen regnal year 1196 A.D. inscription of Kulottunga III found on a broken pillar lying in the second prakara of Nellaiyapper temple registers a gift of the tax of fifteen Kasu accruing from certain lands in Ariyantavan alias Valaiyakranallur in Amudagunavalanadu which had been granted for worship in the temple of Tirunelveli Udaiyar by Vidivitankanselman alias Tyagavinodamuvendavelan the headman of Palaiyur in Tiruvarurkurram a sub-division of Geyamanikkavalanadu.<sup>22</sup> Twenty first regnal year 1199 A.D. inscription of Kulottunga III found on the south outside wall in Tottuvayyanmangalam in Nanjinadu a sub-division of Uttamachola valanadu made to selettiyyavanden alias Vilinattaraiyan of Vilinam alias Rajendra Cholapattinam in RajaRaja Tennadu.<sup>23</sup> Jatavarmakulasekharapandya I (1190 – 1215 A.D.) ascended the Pandya throne in 1190 A.D. the second Pandya empire appeared in the Political horizon.

Jatavarmakulasekharapandya Ist ascending year 1190 A.D. inscription found on the last wall of the second Prakara of the Nellaiyapper temple. States that the king built the high prakara wall of the temple of Siva who had sprung from bamboo, from the booty obtained after defeating, Kerala, Chola and Hoysala kings.<sup>24</sup> Fourth regnal year 1194 A.D. inscription of Jatavarman Kulasekhara I found on the outside of the west wall of the second prakara registers gift of land in Palanjivalamangalam in Kilvembunadu to one Apot Sahayabhatta for conducting a special service to the deity of Tirunelveli Udaiyar temple on Visakha the natal of the King.<sup>25</sup> Ninth regnal year 1199

A.D. inscription of the JatavarmanKulasekhara I found on the outside of the south wall of the second prakara records an order of the king, two veli of temple lands assigning to the Sanakarapad Iyar of Chuttevalipperundu in Tirunelveli who were required to maintain lamp service in the Tirunelveli Udaiyar temple instituted by the two members of the Abhimanabhushanan tenrondakaikolar of Tirunelveli.<sup>26</sup>

Maravarmasundarapandya Ist (1216 – 1238) second regnal year 1217 A.D. inscription found on the inside wall of the third Prakara of Nellaiyapper temple registers a gift of six ma of land and some paddy to seven men from the addukkalaipuram lands in the Padappaikurichi in Kilkalakurram belong to the temple at Tirunelveli.<sup>27</sup> The same king eighth regnal year 1223 A.D. inscription found on the north wall of the third prakara of the Nellaiyapper temple registers a gift of three and half ma of land on behalf of Alagiyapillai alias Kalingarayer of Ilagudi to the two Brahmins as adyayena Virutti for chanting Vedas during the service called Konchipuram then dam Sandhi instituted in the temple of Tirunelveli Udaiyar.<sup>28</sup> Maravarmasundarapandya II (1238 to 1253) third regnal year 1240 A.D. inscription found on the east wall of third Prakara outside of the Nellaiyapper temple registers a gift of cows and two ma of land in Kannanur alias Raviventrachaturvedimangalam in Kilvembunadu to Sundarapandya Brahadarayan for providing milk on the eight occasion of worship in the temple Tirunelveli Udayanarayanar during the service instituted by Chedirayer.<sup>29</sup>

Jatavarman alias Tribhuvanachakravartin Virapandya II (1253 – 1268) co-ruler of Jatavarmasundarapandya Ist (1251 – 1268) fifth regnal year 1258 A.D. inscription found on the outside of the west wall of the second prakara of Nellaiyapper temple registers provision for oil for an evening light to the shrine of Narpatoenayirapillaiyar at Villavarayanallur in Melvembunadu.<sup>30</sup>

MaravarmanKulasekharapandyas (1268 – 1312) twenty third regnal year 1291 A.D. inscription found on the west outside wall of the third prakara registers a gift of land made by EnakkuNallaperumal alias Narasingadevar for providing offerings to the god Tirunelveli UdaiyaNayanar during the ardhajamam service and for founding a brahmana village called Kollamkondapandyachaturvedimangalam colonised by twenty four brahmanas well versed in the Vedas and Sastras and for building two temples of Siva and Vishnu respectively called Narasinga Isvaramudaiyar and Enakkunallavinnagar Alvar.<sup>31</sup>

Virapandya left the Pandya country under the device of coregents rule. The Coregency was shared by following rulers namely Sundarapandya, Vikramapandya, Kulasekharapandya and Jatavarman Parakiramapandya who had his seat at Madurai in 1315 A.D. also had his Jurisdiction over Madurai, Ramnad Pudukkottai and Tirunelveli.<sup>32</sup> In 1318 A.D. Kusrukhan the General of Mubaraksha the sultan of Delhi invaded to Madurai Parakiramapandya fled to the forests and Khusrukhan captured Madurai. After the departure of Khusrukhan, Parakiramapandya came from his hiding place and resumed his rule.<sup>33</sup> In 1323 A.D. Muhammedbin Tughlad the sultan of Delhi captured Madurai from Parakiramapandya and made it as twenty third province of Delhi Sultanate.<sup>34</sup>

Sadaiyavarman Parakiramapandya the petty pandya chieftain of Vindanur established Tenkasi city on the northern bank of river chittaru and made it as his capital city. He laid the foundation of Tenkasi Pandya rule. He was succeeded by his younger brother Sadayavarmankulasekhara (1463 – 1473). Kulasekhara was succeeded by his son Alaganperumal Parakiramapandya (1473 – 1506 A.D.) Alaganperumal was succeeded by his brother. Abirama Parakiramapandya (1506 – 1530 A.D.) and Ahavaraman (1532). Ahavaraman was succeeded by his son Jatavarman Srivallabha (1532 – 1544 A.D.)

After the fall of later Pandyas Tirunelveli came under the control of Nayaks who ruled from Vijayanagar and administered the south coastal territories including Thoothukudi through the Nayaks.<sup>35</sup> The Nayaks appointed Poligars Among them Vettumperumal installed in the place of Kayattar under the supervision of Madurai Nayak. From Kayattar Vettumperumal ruled Thoothukudi and the neighbouring places systematically and get tribute from the Paravas of Pearl fishery and paid it to the imperial authority. According to the Jesuit letters Vettumperumal acted as “King of Thoothukudi”<sup>36</sup> Vettumperumal and Jatavarman Srivallabha (1534 – 1544) the ruler of Tenkasi often fought with each other.

Above said inscriptions found in the walls of Tirunelveli Temple revealed the history of Tirunelveli from eight century A.D. to the first half of fourteenth century. From eighth century A.D. to the beginning of fourteenth century A.D. Tirunelveli was ruled by early Pandyas. Later Cholas and Later Pandyas.

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## END NOTES

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