

Excavations in Tamil Nadu - A Study

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Abstract

Most human beings have some interest in the past and are always curious about the traces let by their predecessors. The Greek word Archaios means ancient while logos refers to its feature i.e., Science. Archaeology deals with the story of man's past through his material remain; it helps to understand culture, know history and preserve heritage, and contributes immensely to tourism. Archaeological excavations are no longer a treasure hunt but a search for information and a means of answering specific questions. Archaeologists are responsible for classifying and interpreting the artifacts of ancient societies with the evolution of mankind.

Keywords: Archaeology, Excavations, History, Tamil Nadu

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology, as a discipline has developed into several dimensions and can be broadly divided into Pre-Historic Archaeology and Historical Archaeology. The excavations carried out in the respective sites uncovered the Palaeolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Iron Age settlements. Though the history of Tamil Nadu can be traced from Pre-historic period with the discovery of stone tools as accidental findings, it was the proper and systematic excavation in various sites by different agencies that raised the curtain for understanding the past.

The excavations are conducted at historically important sites, identified with the help of Archaeological source through exploration by the department. It so far excavated 33 sites and unearthed various artifacts of different periods. Some of the excavated sites have been converted into site museums. The excavations carried out at Tiruttangal, Mangudi, Modur, Kovalanpottal, Anamalai, Pallavamedu, Boluvampatti, Panayakulam, Kurumbanmedu, Kannanur, Alangankulam and Perur are some of the important sites dating back from pre-historic to that of Historic period. They have yielded excellent artefacts confirming the location of the ancient capitals, trade centres and their relationship between South India and North India and between Tamil Nadu and the Roman Empire. In each cultural period one major excavation established the ground rules in terms of cultural sequence, artifacts and other associated findings. Subsequent excavations have not only confirmed the results of the earlier findings but also substantiated and supported the outcomes of the major excavations.

EXCAVATIONS LIST OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL (INSTITUTION – WISE)

Excavations have been conducted over considerable length of time starting from 1863. They cover a wide range of periods from the Paleolithic to the modern era traversing diverse periods such as Mesolithic, Neolithic, Megalithic, Historic, Medieval and Modern. Some of the sites are chance finds, explorations and trial excavations. A total of 134 excavations have been carried out so far by agencies such as Archaeological Survey of India – 71, Tamil Nadu State Departments of Archaeology- 33, Ancient History and Archaeology Department, University of Madras – 17, Tamil University, Thanjavur-6, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswathi Viswa Mahavidyalaya (Deemed University), Kanchipuram-4, Pondichery University-1, Sharma Centre for Heritage Education-1 and University of Kerala Tiruvananthapuram [Dr.A. Rajendran]-Pommaiya Playam Pondichery-1.

IMPORTANT REVELATIONS FROM MAJOR EXCAVATIONS

The Archaeological investigations carried out in the excavation field for the last five decades have completely changed the historical picture of Tamil Nadu. The reasonably sufficient data collected from the excavations testified to the existence of the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Iron Age culture, unfolding a number of aspects of human life in vogue in this period. The available published reports of scientific study in recent years have also made the time span of the sites relatively more precise than what is previously known. The story behind these archaeological investigations indeed are very interesting as it has been the result of popular curiosity and scientific techniques of investigations coupled with a new understanding of the process of culture dynamics.

The Paleolithic Culture as revealed from the excavations carried out at Attirampakkam established the nature of hominid activities at the site in the environmental context and the age of the assemblages. Thousands of tools of Lower Paleolithic Acheulian hominids were found deeply buried within beds of laminated clay, indicating a possible lagoon or swampy environment close to the Paleo-Kortallayar river basin. A very interesting discovery was the set of animal foot prints-the first of their kind to be documented in South Asia. These comprise a set of 17 round impressions; a set of hood-prints and three fossil teeth including an upper molar of a water buffalo, a lower molar of a horse and a left lower molar of a nilgai, (Fossils are rare at Indian Lower, Middle Palaeolithic sites), Attirampakkam, Vadamadurai, Gudiyam are some of the important excavated sites of prehistoric period that reinforced the finding at Kortallayar basin.

Mesolithic or Microlithic Age (the late Stone Age) succeeded the middle stone age. An important feature of this culture was the extensive use of Microlithic tools used for fishing. A number of microlithic tools were recovered from the excavations at Mangudi, Triuthangal, Thiruneveli, T.Kallupatti, Mayiladumaparai, Dailamalai, Togarapalli, Mullikadu and

Kovalanpottal. The occurrence of microliths in the stratified layers was the important finding in Mangudi excavations. A sterile layer below the megalithic cultural phase was also noticed. Under this sterile layer the microliths were found. These discoveries certainly proved the existence of the microlithic culture in Tamil Nadu in the Cultural sequence and chronological context.

The Neolithic People and their settlements are equally remarkable while studying the pre-historic period of Tamil Nadu. But fewer investigations were carried out in South India of late prehistoric remains, which include enigmatic monuments dating back to Neolithic and Iron Age periods. Especially notable are the Neolithic ash mounds in Karnataka and Andhra regions and the discovery of various kinds of stone implements in Dharmapuri, Vellore and Tiruvannamalai regions of Tamil Nadu. The ash mound phenomenon is focused in the semi-arid granitic region of the southern Deccan, particularly in the Karnataka region. Both functional and ritual interpretations have been proposed for the ash mounds, but the activities that lead to their creations remain unknown. Further study in focusing this aspect has to be carried out, which will solve the Neolithic problem of Tamil Nadu. Whatever these activities were, they came to an end sometime in the middle or late Neolithic period and were eventually replaced by altogether different activities that led to the creation of monuments made up of very large stones. These megaliths are found all across the South Indian peninsula, and seem to have been created for burying the dead. Until recently, most pre-historic archaeology in South Indian has focused on description and chronological reconstruction. Much interpretation is required for further study on the migration and cultural traits of this period.

The pit dwelling located at Paiyampalli excavation revealed a distinct feature of Neolithic and Megalithic cultures. The excavation also showed some developments in the mode of man's life style in adopting technique for the preparation of ground and polished stone axes and the association of microlithic tools along with Neolithic culture.

The excavation at Mayiladumparai revealed the three phases of pre-historic period i.e., Microlithic, Neolithic and Iron Age. The occurrence of handmade red ware pot shreds along with Neolithic stone tools and the discovery of iron age implements and black and red ware potsherds reveals the fact that the transformation of Neolithic to Megalithic culture occurred in the region.

The recent systematic excavation at Modur has yielded a large number of stone objects like spheroid rubbers, oval shaped discoid's, pestles, grooved hammers and different type of grinders. More than 500 stone objects were found. The recovery of a beaked mother goddess figurine in Modur is of special significance. It bears close resemblance to the figurine of mother goddess excavated at Inamgaon in Maharashtra by Archaeologists of the Deccan College, Pune. For the first time Neolithic implements were unearthed in the stratified layers and were obtained in the Pre-Iron Age levels. It is noteworthy that similar types of tools were obtained at Pikhihal,

T.Narasipur, Kupgal, Kudatini, Toranagallu (Bellary District) in Karnataka and Paiyampalli in Tamil Nadu. The occurrence of large quantity of polished stone Celts and other stone objects along with Grey, brown and tan ware pots sherds coincides with the date for Neolithic culture of Tamil Nadu which is assigned to 3000 BC.

Iron Age Culture: The usage of Iron was the important phenomena of Iron Age of Megalithic period as it was the harder and cheaper metal as well as more easily available than copper and bronze. Iron tools and implements helped in the advancement of agriculture which in turn leads to the development of civilizations. The development of script and languages which formed the basis of all modern languages and literature, advancement in art, architecture, formation of large empires and the rise of town and cities, emergence of a rich and powerful middle class and the widespread migration of people are the general phenomena of this age. To some extent, in this age the existence of social inequalities began which later on developed into a malevolent factor for our present day society. Sanur, Amirthamangalam, Kodumanal, Adichanallur and Mallappadi excavations have brought to light the existence of the Iron Age inhabitations and their cultural traits in Tamil Nadu.

HISTORIC PERIOD

In Tamil Nadu, the historic period and the classical Sangam age are identified with each other. The first bright epoch in the history of the Tamil land is that reflected in the literature of Sangam. The archaeological factors confirm the evidence of a Roman factory in the first century and goes to confirm the date suggested for the Sangam age.

The discovery of Roman pottery at Arikamedu was the water mark for studying the then Roman society and the trade contact between Tamil Nadu and Rome. Most ancient Roman ceramics are divided into three general categories according to their feature and functional values. The first and foremost ceramic Amphorae were primarily used for import and export of wine, olive oil and Quam, i.e., a fish sauce. While the Coarse ware was utilitarian and undecorated: and Fine ware was functional as well as decorative. Depending on the local production, these fine wares be referred to as Arretine, Terrassigillata, or African Red Slip. Terra Sigillata is a broad term that applies to pottery form any locale having a shiny red slip wares made in Arezzo, Italy, a major production centre during the reign of Augustus Circa first century, are referred to as Arretine. And the African Red Slip or ARS wares were made in Africa and date from the second to eighth centuries. Stamps are perhaps the most reliable source of information for determining locale. Each factory or major production centre had its own logo, which generally identified the owner of the factory, stamped on the vessels. These insignias not only indicate locale, but also allow archaeologists to geographically mark the development of certain pottery styles by examining distribution patterns. The unstamped postsherds are assessed by their appearance, form, shape, quality, texture, and colour of clay and decoration which have the regional expressions. Good number of stamped Arretine and the African Red Slip potsherds

were found in the excavations at Arikkamedu and Alagankulam. In particular, the discovery of antiquities in Alagankulam revealed the existence of Roman trade centre in the East coast.

Other important artefacts that prove the contact between India and the rest of Asia are tiny glass beads of dark blue, dull red and a few other colours found in huge numbers at Arikkamedu. These beads are similar to the beads found in Thailand and in Korea where 10,000 of them were found in the tomb of a king who died in 523 CE. Similar beads were also found all along the coast of East Africa, South East Asia, in the Philippines, Indonesian Islands and in Japan. Hence, to some extent we can assume that these might have been manufactured at Arikkamedu and exported to other places.

The excavation at Korkai had brought to light a few piece of Northern Black Polished ware datable to 3rd – 4th century BC for the first time. At Vasavasamudram a neck portion with handles on either side of an amphora of Mediterranean origin was another important find from excavation. At Kodumanal the unearthed antiquities from both deposits of habitation and burial sites yielded good number of inscribed potsherds, carnelian beads, and spindle whorls confirms the existence of bead making industry and weaving industry. Kanchipuram excavation proves the fact that the early punch marked coins and other coins were cast by terracotta moulds. The structural activities of the ancient people and their engineering skill proved that they were masters in construction of water reservoir and wharf and the basement of Buddha Vihara. Uraiyyur, Tirukkampuliyur and Alagarai excavations yielded number of inscribed potsherds which has revealed the widespread knowledge of writing among all classes of people.

MEDIEVAL:

Formation of cities/urbanization happened primarily in the Ganga Plains when the Mahajanapadas rose into prominence. This was followed later in other regions i.e., in the Deccan and South India. The formation of cities was not only due to trade activities but also the emergence of strong political powers and spread of religions. Thus Jainism and Buddhism exerted their influence in this process. The development of urban centres did not occur overnight; the emergence of cities, their growth, and trade flourished and continued till the 5th – 6th century and beyond the first millennium. The temple cities, like Thanjavur, Srirangam, Kanchipuram, Madurai continued to exist as the urban centres.

The study of the urban cities can be classified as (i) Power centres (fortified cities viz) Thanjavur, Gangaikondacholapuram, Panchalankuruchi etc., (ii) Trade and economic centres with high consumer potential (iii) port cities like Kaveripattinam, Arikkamedu, Alagankulam, Korkai and Vasavasamudram etc., as well as (iv) towns showing trends of urbanism-Sengamedu, Andipatti, Maligaimedu, Perur and (v) Cultural and religious centres Thanjavur, Mammallapuram and Kanchipuram. To locate and study hinterland towns with prominent regional city centres was made possible due to the excavations carried out in these areas. The study of Arikkamedu, an entry port on the eastern coast, revealed that besides it being an Indo-Roman trading centre it was also a pivot for regional exchange system. This aspect came to

light during the study of excavated antiquities from Sengamedu and Maaligaimedu, and they show the development of these towns with urban trends.

MODERN:

For the study of modern period there are number of written records, such as Chronicles, annuals and official records of British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and others who came to India for Trade and occupied. The excavations carried out at Gingee, Tranquebar (Taragampadi) and Panchalankurichi revealed the structural activity and made us understand the plan of the Citadel, Fortification wall etc., the recovered antiquities like Chinese Porcelain pot sherds, glass bottles, stone ball cannons and others throw light on the warfare activities and day-to-day life of that period.

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF TAMIL NADU PRE-HISTORIC PERIOD:

Palaeolithic man initially lived in the natural caverns as seen in Gudiyam cave near Poondi. In Neolithic period he moved to the foot hills by digging pits for the dwellings and having thatched roofs over them. He used crude stone tools in Palaeolithic age, small sized tools in Microlithic period, and polished stone tools in Neolithic period. When they began to live in a settled like, manufactured hand made pottery and they knew the art of cooking. In the megalithic period they used wheel turned fine variety of pottery for their daily usage. The major occupation of these periods were hunting, farming, dishing and rearing of the animals.

The disposal of dead was widely practiced in this period. This had been revealed from the availability of different kind of burial like Urns, Cairn circle, Dolmenoid cist, Sarcophagus etc. They also used big sized pots in various shapes even the shape of the animal (sarcophagus) for burying the dead. The people of this period believed in life after death and they worshipped their ancestors. The worship of mother goddesses also seems to have gained importance during this period as evidenced from Modur and Adichanallur excavations. The iron implements found in Modur and Adichanallur excavations. The iron implements found in the excavations of almost all megalithic sites revealed the fact that they knew the art of ironsmelting and making meta objects. Bead making and weaving industries also existed in this period.

HISTORIC PERIOD BUILDING ACTIVITIES:

The early historic and the medieval period show the massive development in building activities. Big sized baked bricks were used for constructing houses as revealed from excavations at Korkai, Karur, Poompuhar etc. The flooring was laid by mixing lime with rubbles of the available materials like lime shell (Alagankulam). Ring wells were provided for drinking water. In medieval period secular buildings like palaces were constructed with baked bricks as revealed from Gangaikondacholapuram excavations. The roof was covered with flat tiles and fixed in frames with the help of iron nails and clamps. The superstructures were supported by wooden pillar. Four types of channels were noticed in the Pandaivedu excavation. They were used for brining water from the nearby river and draining the sewage water.

The food habits of the people of Tamil Nadu are known from the excavated antiquities of various sites. They took both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. This has been revealed from the occurrence of food grains and animal bones in the excavations. Earthen vessels were used for storing and cooking the food.

The excavated antiquities such as terracotta ear ornaments, beads and armlets, shell bangle pieces, semiprecious stone beads revealed that the people adorned themselves with ornaments. In the medieval period they began to use glass bangles with decoration, copper and gold ornaments.

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

Korkai was the centre for making shell bangles and pearl fishery. Recent findings of large number of Roman potteries and coins from Karur, Alagankulam, Arikamedu revealed the foreign trade. The finding of NBP sherds from Korkai and Alagankulam proved the trade contact with Gangetic plain.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS

The occurrence of large number of graffiti marked and inscribed postsheerds in the excavated sites exposed the fact that the people knew the art of writing. The different types of hip-hops collected from the excavations might have been used as a playing object by the children. The other popular play appears to be gambling using dice. As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned this play seems to be played from very early period i.e., from 4th century BC (Alagankulam). Chess was another indoor game played by the people. For this play they used gamesman made up of terracotta and bone. These types of chess terracotta (games men) are found in the excavations at Tirukampuliyur, Andipatti and Perur.

In the early historical period Buddhism had its foot hold in Tamil Nadu. Excavations revealed the basement of the Vihara and Stupas at Kanchipuram and the Vihara at Poompuhar. The devotees seem to have worshipped Buddhapada and miniature Buddha images here. The worship of Hindu Gods had become prominent during 4th-5th centuries. The excavations undertaken at Alagarai and Tirukkampuliyur had revealed the fact that Ganapati with his vahana mouse was also worshiped. The huge terracotta bull found in the excavation at Andipatti might have been used for votive purpose. Senthamanagalam excavation has brought to light that Vishnu as crawling Krishna was in great veneration among the Vaishnavites. Worship of Shiva as Phallus by the Saivites is known from the discovery of Phalluses during exploration held at Padaivedu.

Archaeological Excavation Method – General Note

Archaeology is a science that throws light on the social cultural past of a region which may either be a prehistoric or historic, with authentic evidences that are collected through exploration of villages and excavation at potential areas. In the course of establishing the fact, application of updated scientific method like carbon-14 method and Thermoluminescence dating are also involved along with comparative study of antiquities. Besides understanding the

cultural heritage of a region, antiquities unearthed from excavation also revealed the existence of maritime trade contact of natives with Westerners.

Excavation is the method extensively adopted by the archaeologist to recover antiquities in order to reveal the cultural habitation of a region through systematic study.

The steps of excavation are as follows.

1. The selection of a site is based on the rich yield of antiquates collected during routine exploration of villages by the archaeologist.
2. Collecting information on local legends, references from literature and inscriptional remains.
3. The contour survey is carried out by the experts in the engineering section to fix the highest for excavation.
4. With the Financial allotment from State Government and permission from Archaeological Survey of India, excavation trenches are laid with an extent of 4x4mts and 4x5mts where required.
5. For every pick labourers are allowed to sort and pick out the antiquities namely beads bangle pieces, various potsherds etc., using specially made archaeological knives.
6. Sieving is done to recover left over tiny antiquities archaeologist
7. The collected potteries are washed with washing powder using nylon brushes and dried under sun.
8. Rim portion potteries are selected and remaining potteries placed in the potter yard boxes.
9. The collected antiquities are secured safely in the antiquity cover with all details namely date, object, locus, depth and stratum.
10. Chemical treatment is given for antiquities which are in highly corroded state.
11. In case of exposure of ring well and brick structural remains strengthening process is done by applying requisite chemical coating.
12. Cleaning of trenches and covering it with tarpaulin is taken up every day at the close of work.
13. Stratigraphical layers are marked based on colour and texture of soil and are numbered starting from H(Humus) to N.S(Natural Soil).
14. Antiquities and trenches are photographed with scale.
15. Three dimensional measurements are recorded for all remarkable findings.
16. Once excavation is over, Excavation trenches are completely filled with same earth and handed over to the owner of the land.

The preparation of report is the final stage of excavation work. It involves the following steps.

1. Antiquities from each trenches are classified material wise and in chronological order.
2. Description of antiquities is prepared with comparative study.
3. Remarkable unearthed antiquities are drawn and photographed.
4. Important rim portion potteries are drawn according to their types.

Finally, the report on the excavation work together with contour and location map is brought out in a book form for the benefit of scholars, students and public.

CONCLUSION:

Globalization is the talk of the day and this has also been reflected in the phenomenon for understanding the past and the present day study of archaeology and history. With this process, the world is being made into one place i.e., Global village with its systemic properties. The study of globalization and of the global system constitutes a potential revolution in the social science. It also involves inter connections across some boundaries and the dissolving of some other boundaries. The basic essence of globalization is the convergence of all the countries into a single unit, whether economically or politically. It is through this homogenous identity all countries can be united and the boundaries can be also erased.

Thanks to the archaeological excavations, that it has brought out the ruins of Pompeij buried by volcanic eruption and preserved the towns like Harappa so perfectly. Excavations were even able to find carbonized loaves of bread in a bakery offering an unprecedented window into the daily life of ancient Roman city. Similarly, unique and rare antiquities are found in Tamil Nadu which revealed the continuous occupations of the sites till today. All local differentiation and regional variations are reflected in the materials unearthed; Thesis due to the cultural exchange and intercultural borrowings. But to some extent, excavations carried out in Tamil Nadu have revealed the unknown history of Tamil Nadu and has thrown open the various cultural activities of our ancestors for further study and research.

The archaeology of Tamil Nadu is not a static thing but a dynamic force. It is forever evolving with the passage of time and with the revelation of new discoveries. Every fresh exploration or excavation – though it takes off from previous efforts – contributes significantly to an understanding of the past by unfolding new vistas and unraveling fresh mysteries of our glorious past. It is my fervent hope that this lecture will spur action towards undertaking more excavation in hitherto uncovered areas such as Neolithic / Chalcolithic culture, Kalabhras period etc., and throw fresh light on topics left untouched or not fully explored. By this approach, we can hope to gain better insight into the dark alleys and narrow by lanes of Tamil Nadu archaeology.

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