



ISSN: 2394-1642

(IRJHLL)

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH
JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES,
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

IMPACT FACTOR - 2.255

Vol.2 Issue 8

August 2015

Website: www.aarf.asia

E-Mail: editoraarf@gmail.com, editor@aarf.asia



MYTHICAL ORIGINS OF THE VELLALAS OF SOUTH INDIA

Pragyan Choudhary
Head, Department of History
Digambar Jain PG College, Baraut
Distt Baghpat, U.P.
(Affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut, U.P.)

ABSTRACT

Myths are generally considered as sacred as they give birth to legends and traditions. A myth has its own logic when it tries to explain the origin of certain phenomenon, place or people. On account of its strength of narration and logic, myths shed a good deal of light over many unknown events of the past. The real significance of the myths lies in its hidden knowledge and antique wisdom which guides primordial societies and governs the course of their history. A myth has considerable literary and classical value and in this respect it can be judicially utilized to obtain a scientific understanding of the antiquities. Historians, Sociologists and Anthropologists give due importance to the prevailing myths among ancient communities as they serve as precious medium of diffusion of memory from generations to generations. This paper intends to study the mythical origins of the Vellalas who are regarded as an important peasant community of Tamilnadu. The origin of the Vellalas is shrouded in mystery and some of their mythological traditions possess substantial data that needs to be studied and properly interpreted. Here, an attempt is made to understand the origin of the Vellalas through some important Tamil traditions such as Baramahal Records.

Keywords: *Myths, Vellalar, Baramahal Records, Visvakarma, Krishna*

Myth is generally regarded as a 'sacred' narrative, from which legends and fairy tales are not always clearly distinguishable. In a common tradition of analysis, myth is above all explanatory, i.e. how something came to be as it is? It is believed that the meaning of a myth lies below the narrative surface, being detectable by a close analysis of the individual incidents and

items in the narrative, by their regrouping, and by their study in the context of the transformations they undergo in all versions of the myth.¹ They then reveal an endless struggle to overcome 'contradictions'. If study of myth is linked with psychological, literary, and classical and sociological studies, it may no longer remain a 'sacred' narrative but tends to become a whole value-bestowing area of belief.

The origins of ancient communities, as determined by modern historical investigation tend to diverge from the picture framed by mythology. The mutually contradicting positions and the polarization of the results produced by history and mythology respectively add to the confusion and distract us from arriving at a generally acceptable conclusion. The main difficulty is not in the difference of the nature of the two disciplines but rather from the failure to recognize the inherent ability of mythology to contribute to the process of unveiling the remote past.

The value of a tradition like myth is not determined by the mode of its expression because a simple society may be prone to mythical narrative instead of historical narrative. Here, when a tradition is expressed in the form of a sacred narrative, its significance cannot be reduced merely by dismissing it as a non-historical narrative. In mythological traditions too, both the purpose of action as well as the agency of action are as human as in the case of historical traditions, despite differences in their relative importance². Since the efficacy of the historical traditions is restricted to the immediate past, the events occurring in the more remote periods often take the form of a myth. Myth is in a sense a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past.³ Hence, the analysis and interpretation of myths can reveal the more emphatic assumptions of a society as well as some 'grand events' of the past, such as the creation of the world, the origin of man and gods, the justification of kinship etc.⁴ Myths can also be seen as charters of validation in which the aim was to provide a sanction for current situations.⁵ On account of their social under-pinnings, myths become very important for the study of social history.

The question of the origin of the Vellala is hotly debated among the experts of South Indian history. Drawing on various kinds of data that is available in both history and mythology, the scholars have tried to investigate their origins from different perspectives. Before addressing the origins of Vellala community, it is essential to look at the genesis of the term itself which may provide important clues to their origins.

¹ Allan Bullock *et al.*, (Eds.) *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, London, 1988, p. 556.

² Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History – Some Interpretations*, Hyderabad, 1984, pp. 294–95.

³ *Ibid.* 294

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Fontana, op. cit.*, 556.

The word 'Vellalar' or 'Vellalan' is etymologically derived from 'Vellanmai,' where 'vellam' means flood and 'anmai' stands for control or management, thus suggesting 'flood-control' or 'water management,' 'cultivation,' 'tillage' etc.⁶ They are mentioned in Sangam literature as 'Karalar' which also denotes 'controller of floods.'⁷ Attempts have also been made to trace etymological connection of 'Vellalan' with 'Pallan', 'Palli,' the term meaning the 'lord of the Vallas or Pallas.'⁸ It has also been argued that the term 'Vellalar' extends beyond notions of caste and appears to be a generic term for farming groups who were dispersed over space.⁹

The stories pertaining to the origin of Vellalas are richly preserved in Tamil legends and traditions. The Baramahal Records¹⁰ provide a mythical account of the Vellala origin:

"In ancient days, when the God Paramesvaradu and his consort the goddess Parvati Devi resided on the top of Kailasa Parvata or mount of paradise, they one day retired to amuse themselves in private, and by chance Visvakarma, the architect of the Devtas or gods, intruded on their privacy, which enraged them, and they cursed him by causing an enemy of his to be born in the Bhuloka or earthly world, who should punish him for his temerity. On Visvakarma's request, the divine pair told him that the person would spring up into existence from the bowels of the earth on the banks of the river Ganga. Visvakarma vowed to annihilate him with a single blow. One day Visvakarma observed the ground to crack near him, and a kiritam or royal diadem appeared issuing out of the bowels of the earth, which Visvakarma mistook for the head of his adversary, and made a cut at it with his sword, but only struck off the kiritam. In the meantime, the person appeared out of the earth, with a bald pate, holding in his hand a golden ploughshare, and his neck encircled with garlands of flowers. The angry Visvakarma instantly laid hold on him, when the Gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and others appeared and interceded for the earth-born personage, and reminded him of his vow and his failure to annihilate the person with a single blow. At the intercession and remonstrance of the gods, Visvakarma quitted his hold and a peace was concluded between him and his enemy on the following stipulation, viz., that the *panch jati*, or five castes of silversmiths, carpenters, ironsmiths, stone-cutters, and braziers, who were the sons of Visvakarma, should

⁶ Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Historical Dictionary of the Tamils*, Lanham, Maryland, 2007; Edgar Thurston and K Rangachari (ed) *Castes and Tribes of South India* (New Delhi, 1987), vol. VII, p. 361.

⁷ V. Ramaswamy, *Tamil Dict.*

⁸ Oppert, *Madras Journal of Literature and Science*, pp. 188-788.

⁹ V. Ramaswamy, *Tamil Dict.*

¹⁰ Barahmahal Records, Sec III (Inhabitants), Madras, 1907. Also cited in Thurston, *Castes & Tribes*, pp. 361-364, and M. Arokiaswami, *Kongu Country*, pp. 15-16.

be subservient to the earth-born person. The deities bestowed on the person these three names. First, Bhumi Palakadu or saviour of the earth, because he was produced by her. Second, Ganga kulam or descendent of the river Ganga, by reason of having been brought forth on her banks. Third Murdaka Pulakadu or protector of the plough, alluding to his being born with a ploughshare in his hand, and they likewise ordained that, as he had lost his diadem, he should not be eligible to sovereignty, but that he and his descendants should till the ground with his privilege, that a person of the caste should put the crown on the king's head at the coronation. They next invested him with the yegnopavitam or string, and, in order that he might propagate his caste, they give him in marriage the daughters of the gods Indra and Kubera. At this time, god Siva was mounted on a white bullock, and the god Dharamraja on a white buffalo, which they gave him to plough the ground, and from which circumstance the caste became surnamed Vellal Warus or those who plough with white bullocks. Murdaka Palaku had fifty-four sons by the daughter of god Indra, and fifty-two by the daughter of the god Kubera, whom he married to the one hundred and six daughters of Nala Kubarudu, the son of Kubera, and his sons-in law made the following agreement with him, viz., that thirty-five of them should be called Bhumi Palakulu, and should till the ground; thirty-five of them named Vellal Shetti, and their occupation be traffic; and thirty-five of them named Govu Shetlu, and their employment breeding and feeding of cattle. They gave the remaining one the choice of three orders, but he would not have any connexion with either of them, from whence they surnamed him Agmurdi or the alien. The Agmurdi had born to him 2500 children, and became a separate caste, assuming the appellation of Agmurdi Vellal Waru. The other brothers had 12,000 children, who intermarried, and lived together as one caste, though their occupations were different..."

The Madras Census Report for 1891 refers to another story regarding their origin: "Many thousands of years ago, when the inhabitants of the world were rude and ignorant of agriculture, a severe drought fell upon the land and the people prayed to Bhudevi, the goddess of the earth, for aid. She pitied them and produced from her body a man carrying a plough, who showed them how to till the soil and support themselves. His offspring are the Vellalas, who aspire to belong to the Vaishya caste, since that includes Govaisyas, Bhuvaisyas and Dhanvaisyas (shepherds, cultivators and merchants). A few, therefore, constantly wear the

sacred thread, but most put it on only during marriages or funerals as a mark of the scared nature of the ceremony.”¹¹

According to the Puranas and Mahabharata, when the numerical strength of the Vels grew in the Gangetic region, Lord Krishna shifted them to a strong fort, which he had built at Dwaraka in order to protect the Vels from the assaults of the Rakhshshasas.¹² The migration is also supported by Dowson who says that, ‘...when a new enemy threatened Krishna, a Yavana or foreigner named Kala-Yavana, and Krishna had been so weakened that he knew he must succumb either to him or to his old enemy the king of Magadha, so he and all his people migrated to the coast of Guzerat, where he built and fortified the city of Dwarka....Indra came to visit Krishna at Dwaraka, and implored him to suppress the evil deeds of the demon Naraka...’¹³ Therefore, from time immemorial it was believed that Lord Krishna was both the protector and the progenitor of the Vels. The prevalence of this notion during the period of Naccinarkiniyar, the commentator of *Tolkappiyam*, is attested by his remarks regarding Agastiya’s arrival in South India and Vel-Krishna linkages: “All the gods having gathered on Mount Meru, the mount went down with their weight, and the south rose up, whereupon they chose Agastiyar as the right man to be in the south to redress its balance. The gods requesting Agastiyar, he was soon on his way to the south, when he entered into Dwarka and took along with him 18 kings and 18 families of Vels and Aruvalar of the progeny of the high-crowned Lord, who measured the earth, gave them homes, having destroyed forests.... bound Ravana (from mischief) and having prevented the Rakshasa from coming there, settled himself on the Podiyil (hills).¹⁴

In Sriviyasabharatam, Lord Krishna corroborates the evidence of Nachchinarkiniyar, when he explains his schemes to Uthishtirar:

“O king, we were so much panic-stricken
when Jarasanthan came to us
that all our eighteen families joined
together and made this plan.”¹⁵

¹¹ Thurston, *Castes & Tribes* p. 362; Arokiaswami, *Kongu Country*, p. 16; H.A. Stuart, *Manual of the North Arcot District*, p. 210.

¹² See M. Raghava Aiyengar, *Velirvaralaru* (Madura, 1916), p. 21; M.V. Ramanujachariar (ed.), *Vyasabharatam Sabhaparvam*, Chapter XIV; As cited in Arokiaswami, *Kongu Country*, p. 17.

¹³ John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature*, New Delhi, 1987, p. 167.

¹⁴ *Tolkappiyam*, Nachchinarkiniyar’s comment. Cited in Arokiaswami, *The Early History of the Vellar Basin: A Study in Vellala Origin and Early History*, Madras, 1954, p. 15.

¹⁵ Sriviyasabharatam, *Sabhaparvam*, Chapter XIV. Cited in Arokiaswami, *Vellar Basin*, p. 20.

In the opinion of R.G. Bhandarkar, 'after Krishna gets identified as the tribal hero of the Yadavas Baldeva comes to be regarded as his brother.'¹⁶ This argument further strengthens the notion of Krishna-Vel relationship.

The Sangam poet, Kapilar also throws light on the question of Vel origin and Krishna-Vel connection when in one of his poems he mentions that the first Irukkuvel originated from a fire-pit of a northern sage who ruled in Dwarka 'defended by tall forts.'¹⁷ On this basis, S.K. Aiyengar has interpreted that the Vels belonged to the 'agnikula' or 'fire-race.'¹⁸ The remarks of Naccinarkiniyar help us to identify this 'northern sage' as Agastiya who went to Dwaraka and carried with him 18 kings and 18 families of Vels and Aruvaler to South India.

Despite the fact that the mythological traditions are sometimes allegorical in nature, it cannot be denied that the information about the Vellala origin gathered from these traditions provide some basis to understand their genesis and early history. However, each of the references and legends retrieved from the above-mentioned mythical accounts need to undergo a test of validity before they can be accommodated in a larger historical perspective on the Vellala origin.

References:

- Aiyengar, S.K. (1911), *Ancient India*, London.
- Arokiaswami, M. (1954), *The Early History of the Vellar Basin: A Study in Vellala Origin & Early History*, Madras.
- Arokiaswami, M. (1956), *The Kongu Country*, Madras.
- Barahmahal Records (1907), Sec III (Inhabitants), Madras.
- Dowson, J. (1987), *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology & Religion, Geography, History & Literature*, Delhi.
- Ramaswamy, V. (2007), *Historical Dictionary of the Tamils*, Lanham, Maryland.
- Stuart, H.A. (1894-95), *Manual of the North Arcot District*, 2 vols, Madras.
- Thurston, E. and K Rangachari (1987), [eds] *Castes and Tribes of South India*, New Delhi, vol. 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ S.K. Aiyengar, *Ancient India*, London, 1911, p. 391.