



Research Paper

# Water Management in Ancient Tamil Nadu: Insights from Literature and Inscriptions

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>Water has always been central to human civilization, and ancient societies recognized its importance not only for sustenance but also for societal prosperity and religious significance. In Tamil Nadu, the Vedas extol the vital role of water, stating that all existence originates from it. This article delves into the historical perspective of water management in ancient Tamil Nadu, drawing from literary sources, inscriptions, and scholarly works. It explores the necessity of irrigation, the construction of tanks, wells, and channels, as well as the societal and religious implications attached to water conservation. Through an examination of texts and archaeological findings, the article highlights the significant role played by rulers and communities in water management practices, underscoring its integral connection to societal welfare and religious duty.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397</li> <li>▪ Received: 03-04-2024</li> <li>▪ Accepted: 05-05-2024</li> <li>▪ Published: 15-05-2024</li> <li>▪ IJCRM:3(3); 2024:22-24</li> <li>▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved</li> <li>▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes</li> <li>▪ Peer Review Process: Yes</li> </ul>
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**KEYWORDS:** Water management, ancient Tamil Nadu, irrigation, tanks, channels, societal duty, religious significance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Vedas are unanimous that the life is entirely dependent of water and hence declares- All that exists is due to water, “Āpovāidamsarvam” and elsewhere too we find a mention that- “from water alone is produced food and food is Brahman”

आपोवा अन्नम्।ज्योतिर्अन्नादम्।अप्सुज्योतिःप्रतिष्ठितम्।ज्योतिश्च  
आपःप्रतिष्ठिताः

Hence the conservation of Water was considered as a part of

one’s social as well as religious duty. Understanding well that the wells and tanks get filled when the water table increases which is directly dependent upon the amount of precipitation, digging of Tank was looked upon as one of the seven meritorious acts which a man ought to perform during his lifetime. His dharma (virtue) and Artha (prosperity) would grow when tanks and irrigational channels are constructed, so says the smritis and puranas. Tiruvalluvar devotes a separate chapter (II, No. 11-20) with the heading ‘Van Sirappu’ (in ‘Praise of Rain’) in the Tirukkural.

### Necessity of irrigation

The prosperity of a country depends to a larger extent on the facilities provided for irrigation and water supply. The importance of irrigation was well recognized by the rulers of Tamil country. The construction of irrigation sources was an essential part of any settlement and for bringing lands under cultivation. Very extensive irrigation works were carried out by them using the revenue from wars and taxes along with labour acquired during the expeditions at their disposal. However, due to constant wars with their adversaries they could not carry out their duties in an effective manner. The following anthology from the *Purananuru* (18: 18- 30) is addressed to the Pandiyan Neduncheliyan by the poet Kudapulaviyanar in which the poet exhorts the ruler the necessity of irrigation works for the distribution of water to the fields of his subjects: -

The Tamil Country during the period was endowed with two major perennial rivers, namely, Kaveri and Tamraparani and other rain-fed rivers such as Palar, Ponnaiyar, and Vaigai.

During the time of the Cholas, agriculture was monsoon-based and irrigation-fed. The prosperity of an agricultural country depends on the facilities provided for irrigation and the importance of securing an adequate water supply was recognized in South India from very early times. Special attention was given to the preservation of existing water bodies. Many steps were taken for the distribution of water during the period of Pallavas and Cholas. It was during the time of Pallavas that the kings considered the execution of irrigational work as the duty of the state. They knew the importance of guarding the water resources. The Pallava rulers built many tanks and wells. In order to bring water from distant areas, they took to the methods of constructing channels from rivers and lakes. While the Pallavas were famous for the construction of tanks called *tatakas* or *eri*, the Cholas and the paid much attention to the construction of channels called *vaykkal*.

In fact, it was the duty of the state to construct and maintain sources of irrigation. Canals were dug from the Kaveri River to cover the entire delta region in the country. Besides, the construction of tanks and digging of wells were not neglected with the expansion of the Chola empire, Irrigation facilities also increased manifold under their patronage. Irrigation works of good design were noticed during the period.

A large extent of the area of land in the villages was occupied by tanks and other reservoirs of water. In the inscriptions, we come across words like;” *kulam, odai, aru, kinaru, keni, kidangu, urunikulam, vaykkal* etc.

### Canals /Tanks/Wells

Canals were dug from the Cauvery River to cover the entire Cauvery delta. Though the canals from the river were used for irrigation, the constructed tanks and digging of wells were not neglected. With the expansion of the Chola empire, irrigation facilities also increased manifold under their patronage. Irrigation works<sup>1</sup>were constructed and they had good designs.

Among the various irrigation systems, the canals and channels played a prominent role during the ancient Tamil Country. The canals were generally called by the name *Vaykkal*. Channels were dug to irrigate the lands and the wastewater was collected by canals. Different rights were assigned to a particular set of people and the others were forbidden from cutting branches or to put up *picotahs* for getting water. Canals dug passed through the lands purchased for that purpose. Those who donated lands to temples or public welfare activities were granted permission to dig their own canals. The kings themselves made arrangements to dig canals in their own names. For instance, Vairameganvāykkal<sup>2</sup>, Perumpiduguvāykkal, Paramesvaranvaykkal<sup>3</sup>

The terms Kurungudivāykkāl and Purushothamavāykkāl indicate that the canals were named after the places as well as private individual,

In the absence of natural streams, tanks were used for irrigation. There were a number of tanks in the Pallava, Chola and Pandya country.

Branch canals were also dug there in the canals to be used for “Irrigating the lands”. The canals were also beneficial for irrigation and also for the identification and demarcation of lands. Sometimes the canals were left without any care and left unmaintained. The canals were called by the names of the tanks, which was the source for getting water. The kings granted permission for carrying the water of the tanks through canals for different agricultural lands

The construction of tanks, wells, and channels were considered as acts of charity. Both kings and people donated lands and gold for the maintenance of tanks and channels. While making land grants, the Pallava and the Chola kings clearly specified the irrigational facilities and advised the people to use water according to their needs and punished the offenders. Thus, irrigation was taken care during the ancient days.

The canal-water was taken out through the outlets called *Kannurru*. These outlets should have been many in number, and they should have located in different places. Further, it would help in the letting out of the water at all times even though there was little quantity of water in the tank. Volume XII. No. 34. Which is an example of the involvement of the public in digging and maintaining the tank with their own funding. a village, near Mamallapuram. The inscription, dated 740 mentions, a merchant named Nagan residing at Mamallapuram gifted 400 *Kadi* of Paddy to the village of Paiyanur for digging a tank for the village from the interest accrued from the Paddy gifted.

Besides the *Erivariya* and *Kalinguvariya*,<sup>1</sup> there was a *samvatsaravariya* (annual supervision committee) the maintenance of the tanks and channels. The *Eri-variya* (tank committee) was responsible for the maintenance of irrigational works. It had to maintain, repair and construct the banks and bunds of the rivers and tanks. It also supervised and regulated the flow of water in the channel. The members of the tank committee were called *Eri-Variya-Perumakkal*. The committee accepted

<sup>1</sup>A.R.E., 615 of 1900; S.I.L., Vol.III, No.289

<sup>2</sup> A.R.E.448 and 466 of 1908

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 332 of 1903

the deposits given for the upkeep of the tanks. They undertook periodical repairs out of the interest from these deposits. Silt removing was one of the main works of the tank committee. Boats were used for removing silt from lakes. Every year the silt had to be removed otherwise, it would obstruct the flow of water.

### Tiribuvanamadevipper-eri

There is a mention about the digging of feeder channel to the Tiribuvanamadevippereri<sup>ii</sup> of Kuvam alias Madhurantaka-nallur the inscription record contains a detailed description of the manner and course in which the channel should be dug.

In the report of 326 of 1909 repairs and drudging of the tank – Tirubhuvanamadevippereri is mentioned for the maintenance work, land and fishing taxes have been provided for the same.

The queen of Rajaraja I and mother of Rajendra I is referred to in an inscription of Rajaraja I It gives the evidence that Rajendra I was the son of Tribhuvana Madevi<sup>iii</sup>. A record of Rajendra II (1056) mentions about the existence of Tribhuvanamadevi pereri and the channel was dug out by Irunganur Kizhavan<sup>iv</sup>.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study relies primarily on an analysis of ancient Tamil literature, including texts such as the Purananuru and Tirukkural, as well as inscriptions from archaeological sites across Tamil Nadu. Scholarly works on the administration and social life of ancient Tamil kingdoms, particularly the Pallavas and Cholas, provide additional insights into water management practices. By synthesizing information from these diverse sources, we aim to construct a comprehensive understanding of water management in ancient Tamil society.

## 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ancient Tamil literature and inscriptions offer valuable insights into the importance placed on water management. The Purananuru contains verses exhorting rulers to prioritize irrigation works for the benefit of their subjects. The construction of tanks, wells, and channels was considered not only a practical necessity but also a virtuous act, earning merit for both rulers and donors. The Pallavas and Cholas, in particular, were renowned for their efforts in water conservation and building extensive irrigation networks to support agricultural prosperity.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Water management in ancient Tamil Nadu was not merely a utilitarian concern but a reflection of societal values and religious beliefs. Rulers viewed the construction and maintenance of irrigation infrastructure as a duty of the state, while communities actively participated in charitable acts to

support water projects. Through a combination of literary texts, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence, we gain a deeper appreciation for the intricate relationship between water, society, and spirituality in ancient Tamil Nadu.

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<sup>i</sup>S.I.I.III.156.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., 328 of 1909

<sup>iii</sup> A.R.E. 282 of 1912

<sup>iv</sup> . Ibid, 234 of 1910