

**Jaffna**

**The Land of the Lute.**

**N. M. SAVERI**



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(Centre For Performing Arts)  
Canada

1996 Thirumarai Kalamanram Publications

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ISBN-09681597-0-2

First Edition  
Toronto 1996

Lucky Printers  
Toronto

## PREFACE

Jaffna, the capital of Tamil Sri Lanka, has been in the news in recent times. Newspapers, Radio Stations and Television Networks around the world have been reporting about the civil war that is ravaging this "Land of the Lute". As a result, many people have expressed a sincere desire to know more about the history and geography of Jaffna and the creeds, customs, occupations, festivals, arts and sports of its people.

It is partly in response to these queries that this present monograph is written. Consisting of thirteen essays on various aspects of Jaffna and compiled from notes taken from authoritative sources, it attempts to present a general picture of the "Heartland" of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

It also aims to inform the many Jaffna Tamils who have emigrated to various parts of the globe about the land of their birth and of their roots.

This booklet is also a labour of love which is dedicated to the hundreds and thousands of the Jaffna people of all ages and groups who are undergoing untold hardships and sufferings and who have lost their homes, properties, friends, families and even their lives in a bloody and unabating war. The general picture that is depicted of Jaffna in these pages might not match in all respects the one that is witnessed today; but one hopes and prays for the return of normalcy to this unlucky land.

Many are those who have helped and encouraged me to complete this monograph. I should like to thank them all, and especially Walter Ulmi and Theo Emmenegger of Switzerland, Catharin and Basil Inbarajan of London, Rev. Fr. D. Aloysius and S. Arulanandam of Singapore, Arul Rajendran of Colombo Tirumarai Kalamannam, my many relatives in France and Canada, Marina and Jeyaraj (Lucky Printers) of Canada, and finally all the executive members of **Tirumarai Kala Manram**, Canada.

Harp of the North! that mouldering long hast hung  
    On the witch-elm that shades Saint Fillan's spring,  
And down the fitful breeze thy numbers flung,  
    Till envious ivy did around thee cling,  
Muffling with verdant ringlet every string,-  
    O minstrel Harp, still must thine accents sleep?  
'Mid rustling leaves and fountains murmuring,  
    Still must thy sweeter sounds their silence keep,  
Nor bid a warrior smile, nor teach a maid to weep?

Not thus, in ancient days of Caledon,  
    Was thy voice mute amid the festal crowd,  
When lay of hopeless love, or glory won,  
    Aroused the fearful, or subdued the proud.  
At each according pause was heard aloud  
    Thine ardent symphony sublime and high!  
Fair dames and crested chiefs attention bow'd;  
    For still the burden of thy minstrelsy  
Was Knighthood's dauntless deed, and Beauty's matchless eye.

O wake once more! how rude soe'er the hand  
    That ventures o'er thy magic maze to stray;  
O wake once more! though scarce my skill command  
    Some feeble echoing of thine earlier lay:  
Though harsh and faint, and soon to die away,  
    And all unworthy of thy nobler strain,  
Yet if one heart throb higher at its sway,  
    The wizard note has not been touch'd in vain.  
Then silent by no more! Enchantress, wake again!

*Sir Walter Scott*  
(*The Lady of the Lake*)

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## NAME

It was a moving performance. The lutist's fingers caressingly plucked the strings and the ensuing melody coupled with his melancholic and clear voice produced a song that was sweet and almost celestial. The entire royal court was in rapture. The King was so captivated by the musical performance of the lutist that he rewarded him generously: the entire region of Jaffna was donated to him. Though the land was barren and arid, gardens and groves arose as a result of the hard work put in by the lutist. In order to develop it, he brought his relatives from India as settlers.

Thus began the history of Jaffna.

The name Jaffna is the Europeanized form of the original Tamil name *Yazhppanam*. *Yazh* means lute and *Yazhppadi* or *Yahppanan* is "one whose occupation and caste-duty is to play on the lute".<sup>1</sup> *Yazhppanam* means, thus, the land of the lutist.

One need not wonder that there exist many variations of this legend. One version places the event in the remote past of the Ramayana epoch. After the death of Ravana, the defeated the King of the resplendent Island called Lanka, Rama conferred the title of the King on Vibhishana, a brother of Ravana. It was from Vibhishana that a *Yazhppadi* or lutist who was serving at the royal court received the waste tract of land called Jaffna, then known as Manaltidal.<sup>2</sup> The lutist brought



a thousand families from India and settled them there. He also went to the city of Madura in Northern India and brought with him a son of Kulaketu, a relative of Rama's father, to become the ruler of the new colony. This event is said to have occurred in 101 B.C. The new King was called Vijaya Kulankaic Cakkaravarti.<sup>3</sup>

Another version names the lutist as the blind minstrel Virarakavan. This name was probably borrowed from historical records according to which a Tamil poet by this name visited the court of the King of Jaffna in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

According to yet another version, the King who donated the northern region was Vararasasinghan, the first ruler of the Island.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have differed in their interpretation and evaluation of the above legend. Swami Gnana Prakasar maintained that the "story of the Yalppadi is to be abandoned root and branch." According to him *Yazhppanam* is derived from the Sinhalese word *yapa-ne*, meaning good (*yapa*) village (*ne*) and corresponds to the Tamil name Nallur, which was the capital of Tamil Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

S. Pathmanathan, author of **The Kingdom of Jaffna**, while dismissing the "account of Yalppanan in its developed form" as "nothing more than a legend", documents that "tradition claims that the northern peninsula derived its name from Yalppanan".<sup>7</sup>

M.D. Raghavan, an Indian scholar and author of many books on Sri Lanka, views the story sympathetically and states, regarding the derivation of the name *Yazhppanam*, that the "most simple and the most direct is the derivation from Yalpanan, the panan minstrel with the yal".<sup>8</sup>

The bone of contention seems to be obviously the origin of the name *Yazhppanam*. Swami Gnana Prakasar argued that the "name Jaffna, now designating the entire peninsula, was first given to the new town in Nallur in the 17th century", and that the earliest mention of it is in the Sinhalese literary works of **Selalihini Sandesya** and **Kokila Sandesya** belonging to the seventeenth century A.D.<sup>9</sup>

M. D. Raghavan contended that *Yazhppanam*, under the name of *Yapapatna*, was referred to in the Sinhalese work **Kokila Sandesya**, a **Sandesya Kavya** belonging to the mid-fifteenth century. The verse in question is:

“Enter thou, Yapapatuna,  
Graced with stately buildings  
Emblazened with golden flags;  
Gems and stones shedding brilliance transplendent,  
In charm and splendour, vying with Vaishravana’s city,  
Alakamanda.”<sup>10</sup>

According to C. Rasanayagam, the author of **Ancient Jaffna**, the musician (*Yazhppanan*) returned to India after getting the reward and persuaded some poor families of his caste of lutists to migrate to two areas of the Jaffna Peninsula known today as Karaiyur and Passaiyur—“settlements in remembrance of the lutist Yalpanan. Coming to be so known to the mariners and traders who called at the ports close by, it would have lent its name in course of time, particularly among such strangers, to the chief town and ultimately to the district itself”.<sup>11</sup>

M.D. Raghavan agrees with the view that the name *Yazhppanam* became popular after the Portuguese, who knew the story of the minstrel *Yazhppanan*, had built the town near the panan settlement which was named *Jaffnapatnam*.<sup>12</sup>

In order to assess these various arguments, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- \* The story appears locally for the first time in the **Vaiya Padal**, a Tamil work composed by Vaiyapuri Aiyar, the royal poet of King Segarajasekaran (1519-1565).
- \* The name Jaffna appears not only in Sinhalese literature mentioned earlier, but also in certain Tamil inscriptions of South India belonging to the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup>
- \* The caste of Panar exists to this day in South India. It consists, however, of an ever dwindling group of singers, exorcists and physicians who conduct ceremonies in the Naga shrines of southern Kerala.<sup>14</sup>

- \* The story of *Yazhppanan* may point to a process of early and progressive colonization and settlement of the arid sandy tracts of the North by people of South India. In fact, **Vaiya Padal** enumerates flutists, cymbal players, drummers and other instrumentalists as emigrating from India as settlers.<sup>15</sup>
- \* It may be no coincidence that *yazh*, which was one of the ancient and revered instruments of the Tamils, has been connected with the name Jaffna. Lutes and lutists recall to one's mind not only the place lute played in the life of the ancient Tamils who lived in pre-Sangham and Sangham periods but also the religious veneration with which lutes were held in lands such as Egypt, Sumeria, Chaldea, Crete, Greece, Italy, Spain and perhaps even in Mohenjo-daro (Indus Valley).<sup>16</sup>
- \* The theory advanced by Swami Gnana Prakasar that the legend of the lutist is a clear example of a tendency to explain the origin of names such as *Yazhppanam*,<sup>17</sup> Maviddapura (a Chola princess, Maruta Piravika Valli, born with a horse-face was cured of her deformity by bathing in the miraculous springs of Keerimalai, which once again denotes the abode of a sage with mongoose-face), Thondamanaru (visit paid by Thondaman, the brave general of Kulotunga Chola) and Senthankulam (Senthan was a notorious pirate) may be partly true. However, Swami Gnana Prakasar himself admitted that *Yazhppanam* may "correctly" be called a "country connected with a Yalppanan" who might be considered "the colonizer of our peninsula".<sup>18</sup>
- \* Swami Gnana Prakasar may again be right in asserting that there exists "no evidence for the lute having ever been on the standard of the kings of Jaffna".<sup>19</sup> This was stated in the context of refuting C. Rasanayagam that the lyre flag mentioned in the Tamil work **Kalinkkattup Parani** referred to the Kingdom of Jaffna.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Bull and Setu (the latter connotes the Island of Rameshvaram in South India) are generally accepted to have been the emblems of the Jaffna Kingdom both on its flag and on its coins.<sup>21</sup>

In sum: All the objections against the legend of *Yazhppanan* do not diminish in the least the possibility of an oral tradition preserved in folklore and legend about the origins of Jaffna connected with a "musician". Besides, one has to admit the need for, and indeed the right of, a people with a common language, religion and culture to remember and preserve their misty past in myths and legends. *Yazh* means, in the view of the author of **Leela Kathai**, H.S.David, beautiful and resplendent, and so will it remain in the hearts and minds of the people of Jaffna. <sup>22</sup>

Finally, it is appropriate to note that the Jaffna Peninsula seems to have been designated also by other names:

Erumaimullaitivu, derived from a plant known as erumaimullai - *prenna serratifolia* - that grew abundantly in the eastern portion of the Peninsula which was then an island, <sup>23</sup> Naganadu or the country of the Nagars, Manipallavam, <sup>24</sup> Manipuram, Manavur and Manalur. <sup>25</sup>

It was also known as Ilam, a name designating the entire Island, perhaps due to the fact that the inhabitants of the region spoke a language called Elu. <sup>26</sup>

### Foot Notes

1. Gnana Prakasar, S, "Sources for the Study of the History of Jaffna" in **Tamil Culture**, Volume II, Numbers 3&4 (1953) p. 313. This article will be referred, henceforth, as **Sources**.
2. *Manaltidal* means raised region covered with sand.
3. Kulankaic Cakkaravarti means Emperor with one hand shorter than the other. This version is found in the **Vaiyapadal**, a work on which was based the "historical" Tamil prose called **Yazhppana Vaipavamalai** (written circa 1736 A.D.). The author of **Vaiyapadal** "has put the different legends of his day pell mell without any regard to chronology". **Sources**, pp. 305, 307
4. **Ibid.**, p. 312
5. **Ibid.**, p. 313
6. **Ibid.**, p. 315

7. Pathmanathan, S. **The Kingdom of Jaffna**, Part I (circa A.D.1250 -1450 ), Colombo 1978, pp. 161-162
8. Raghavan, M.D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon A General Introduction** , Colombo 1962, p. 78
9. **Sources**, pp. 303, 315
10. Raghavan, M. D., **op.cit.**, p. 78
11. Rasanayagam, C., **Ancient Jaffna**, New Delhi 1984 , p. 248
12. De Queyroz refers to "the town of the Lord Jaffna" which "is the name of him who first peopled it". De Queyroz, Fernao, **The Conquest (Temporal and Spiritual)**, pp. 47-48 For the Jaffnese, the term *Pattinam* denoted the town of Jaffna. See Raghavan. M.D., **op. cit.**, p.78.
13. See Raghavan, M.D., **op. cit.**, p.78
14. **Ibid.**
15. **Ibid.**, p.79
16. See Vipulananthar, Swami, **Yazh Nul**, Tanjore 1947, p.27. This work explains in detail the various types of *yazh* (lute) that were in use among the Tamils of South India.
17. See **Sources**, p. 314
18. **Ibid.**, p. 313
19. **Ibid.**, p. 314
20. See Rasanayagam, C., **op cit.**, p. 301
21. Brito, who translated the **Yazhppana Vaipavamalai** into English in 1879 suggested that gemini was the emblem of Jaffna. See **Sources**, p. 314
22. David, H.S., *Aninthurai* in N. Maria Xavier, **Cuvaitthen**, Paris 1996, p. 1
23. See Rasanayagam, C., **op cit.**, pp. 53-54. Erumaimullaitivu was shortened to Erumaitivu which became *mahisa dipa* in Pali.
24. See the Tamil Epic **Manimekalai**, *Padalam* eight, nine etc; also Raghavaiyengar, M. Professor, **Araychittokuthi**, Madras 1964 , pp. 222-223
25. See Navaratnam, C.S., **Tamils and Ceylon**, Jaffna 1958, p.75
26. See **Sources**. p. 303; see also Pillay, K.K., **South India and Ceylon**. Sir William Meyer Lectures (1958-1995), Madras 1963, p. 1

# ENVIRONMENT

The geography of a region determines to a large extent the history and life of its people. We shall hence attempt to present a broad picture of the environment of the Jaffna Peninsula.

The Jaffna Peninsula, longitude  $70^{\circ} 54' - 80^{\circ} 2' E$  and latitude  $90^{\circ} 30' - 90^{\circ} 50' N$ , is situated close to the equator. It is approximately forty miles long and four to eighteen miles wide. On its western and northern sides it is bounded by the Palk Strait, on the east and south sides it is hemmed in by the Bay of Bengal and the Jaffna Lagoon respectively. While the Jaffna Lagoon separates the Peninsula from the mainland on the West, the Elephant Pass Lagoon separates it from the mainland on the East. The Thondamanaru and Upparu Lagoons are two internal lagoons within the Peninsula; these help drain the rain water. There is also a small "stream" called Valukkaiyaru which is eight miles long and which helps to drain in the south western portion of the Peninsula.

There are many islands adjoining the Peninsula:

- Karaitivu - deriving its name perhaps from a shrub named *karai*
- Nainativu - sacred to both Hindus and Buddhists
- Eluvaitivu - literally the island of goats
- Analaitivu - known for its good fresh water
- Velanai - known also as Kayts, Uratturai and Tanaltivu
- Mandaitivu - less than a mile from Jaffna town
- Neduntivu - meaning island at a long distance from Jaffna and renamed Delft by the Dutch

There are two more islands named Palaitivu and Kachaitivu (the latter now belonging to India ) which are not inhabited. Fishermen from the Peninsula go to these islands for fishing. There is another islet called Paruttiturai which is a barren land close to Eluvaitivu.

The Jaffna Peninsula is a vast limestone block, the history of which dates back to the Miocene period, when the entire Island lay submerged.<sup>1</sup>

The limestone of Jaffna “is a grey yellow and white organogenic, porous limestone (reef limestone), very karastic in its upper near surface part” and “is typically a compact, hard, partly crystalline rock”.<sup>2</sup> The limestone, said to be 270 feet deep thick, is underlain by a thick sandstone formation.<sup>3</sup> It consists of calcium carbonate that is soluble in the rain water containing carbondioxide. The rain water filters through the karastic openings and other weak points. As the soluble parts disappear, the remaining parts form caverns. Most of these caverns are at Urikkadu.<sup>4</sup>

Limestone wastes are found scattered throughout the Peninsula. In the nothern and western parts of the Peninsula, limestone appears on the surface in the form of hard coral rocks marked with tiny holes resulting from exposure to rain.

The string of islands lying off the west coast of the Peninsula is said to represent a drowned portion of the Peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

“Levelness” is a distinguishing feature of the Peninsula and its islands. Only at cliffy Keerimalai, limestone and sandstone hill rises to a height of thirty feet above the sea level, the highest point. <sup>6</sup> The level of the land is so low that in various places the sea runs in and forms the large lagoons which cut through the Peninsula’s centre and eastern portions.<sup>7</sup> These winding lagoons, which are not accessible to heavy ships, lend a particular beauty to the landscape of the Peninsula.

Along the lagoon area the soil is alkaline. When this land is irrigated, a thin coating of salt comes up to the surface. Vegetation consists of a leafless shrub called *talai* ( *alae africana* ) and other small fleshy plants which are of a grey-green colour (*koddanai* and oleander).

In the northern and western parts of the Peninsula, where limestone is to be found on the surface, no vegetation other than cactus plants and tiny shrubs is possible as there is either very little or no soil covering at all. The scanty vegetation survives partly due to the moisture brought by the wind and partly due to night dews. Palmyrah trees, however, flourish even in this unproductive land, because their strong and long roots are capable of reaching the level of water under the surface.

In certain areas, limestone surface is removed and a thin layer of soil is placed to form garden soil.

Stretches of sand are to be found on the Peninsula's north-east and south-east. During the monsoon periods, sands are carried by the waves and currents from the coast of South India and are blown on shore by the wind, a process which results in the formation of sand dunes. Wooden fences are erected in many places to stop the sand dunes encroaching on the cultivated land. No vegetation is evidently possible on these areas of sand other than a few palmyrah plants.

Tracts of grey loam, whose lower layers are dark or bluish in colour and are flecked by brown hydrated oxides, are found extensively in the Peninsula. Derived from limestone, it is of clayish nature, but it gets hardened and is turned into a white powdery soil of good quality during the dry season.

There is rich red soil (similar to the mediterranean *terra rossa*) of fine texture at the core of the western half of the Peninsula. It is claimed to be decomposed limestone, namely "lime from the comminuted coral"<sup>8</sup> and contains iron oxides. The redness of the soil is attributed to the fact that either the soil is not leached or there is an admixture of iron. The red soil area is the garden land of the Peninsula.

The grey and red soil layers are generally so thin that they are unsuitable for the growth of trees. But vegetables could easily be grown because of the soil's fine texture which is conducive to both root development and exposure to light. In fact, paddy is cultivated on the gray-loam soil while tobacco is grown on the red soil.



The Jaffna Peninsula has the same climate as that of the dry zone of Sri Lanka. Since the Peninsula lies within ten degrees of latitude north of the equator there is "high incidence of solar rays at all times of the year".<sup>9</sup> However, the "processes of convection, adiabatic cooling and resulting condensation" leading to humidity and land-sea breezes make the temperature conditions more equable on the sea board.<sup>10</sup>

The average temperature in Jaffna is the highest in the Island. It is approximately 83 degrees F. ( 28.33 C.) Dryness causes extreme temperatures during the south-west monsoon and the heat wave of India affects the area during the months of April and May.

In the months of April - May and August - September, when the sun is overhead, the temperature stands at maximum. The coolest period occurs in December - January coinciding with the lowest sun.

The annual rainfall varies from one place to the other and also from year to year. The western part of the Peninsula enjoys the mean annual rainfall of less than 50 inches whereas the eastern part has between 50 to 75 inches. The total average rainfall for 1932 was 73.79 inches and for 1936 was 32.44 inches. It is also calculated that rainfall during the north-east monsoon forms 82% of the total annual fall.<sup>11</sup>

Rainfall does not affect the temperature to any great extent for two reasons: because of humidity and because the Peninsula has no mountains. It has no streams either "unless those percolations can be so called which make their way underground and rise thro' the sands on the margin of the sea at low water".<sup>12</sup>

Jaffna is a land of wells, where water rises through the limestone. This phenomenon of innumerable wells with fresh water in the Jaffna Peninsula and in the surrounding islands resting on sand has attracted the attention of early navigators like the sixth century author of **Cosmos Indicopleustes**. This phenomenon found also elsewhere in islands of coral reefs, where the wells with abundance of fresh water is dependent on the tide, has been attributed to the fact that the rocks underneath are "magnesian limestone and coral, overlying a bed of sand".<sup>13</sup> Tennent was convinced that the extent to which fresh water is found in Jaffna "is

directly connected with percolation from the sea.” In Jaffna, the wells in general are below the sea level. The rain water in November fills the well sometimes to the brim but the water sinks to the uniform level during the dry season and remains the same till the next rain. Wells below the sea level never become dry of themselves even during the time of drought. According to an observer, “the contents do not vary with the tides, the rise of which is so trifling that the distance from the ocean, and the slowness of filtration render its fluctuations imperceptible”.<sup>14</sup>

There are three wells which deserve special mention. The well at Puttur, where the soil is said to be light and the surface of the ground hollow, is more than 140 feet deep and the water is fresh at the surface, brackish in the middle and quite salty below. It is said to be directly connected with the sea “by means of a fissure or a channel beneath an arch of magnesium limestone,[and] rises and falls a few inches in the course of every twelve hours”.<sup>15</sup>

Water level on another well at Navakiri rises and falls a little like the Puttur well.

Another well at Tellippalai which has a cavern containing water remains unaffected by rains or drought, maintaining its depth at all times.

There are more than 600 *kulams* or ponds in the Peninsula. These are not man-made but are natural depressions which arise due to the solution of the limestone by the action of the rain water and by the crumbling of the top portion of subterranean limestone cavities. They also serve to conduct the excess rain water underground<sup>16</sup>

The underground water storage supports not only a very high population as drinking water but also serve as good water for watering garden crops.

As far as the soils are concerned, while the soils derived from limestone are by nature not fertile, the grey loam and red soil which lack organic matter (humus) and which can scarcely retain moisture particularly during the dry season, can be made productive by hard work and human skill. Good soil in the Peninsula is “certainly man-made.”<sup>17</sup>

Only about 28% of the land is arable and it is classified into

- a) dry lands where dry grains are grown,
- b) wet lands also known as paddy lands, and
- c) garden lands which are identical with red soil areas where tobacco is grown.

As to the flora of the Peninsula, fleshy shrubs and wiry and stunted trees with small leaves and thorny stems are a common sight. Margosa and tamarind are examples of larger trees while water lilies with small red flowers adorn the ponds in Jaffna. <sup>18</sup>

Some of the trees which grow in the Peninsula are : *Panai* or palmyrah palm, *Tennai* or coconut plam, *Kamuku* or arecanut plam, *Al* or banyan, *Arasu* or bo, *Iluppai* or *Bassia Logifolia* ( South Indian Mehua), *Vempu* or margosa, *Irumpuchuvakkai* or flamboyante, *Puvarasu* or tulip, *Nilavadi* or ingasaman, *Puli* or tamarind, *Pila* or jack, *Ma* or mango. <sup>19</sup>

Jaffna produces some delicious types of mangoes. <sup>20</sup>

Palmyrah deserves special mention. Called *Borassus flabelliformis*, it is one of the most beautiful and useful of the family of palms.

Palmyrah palms are found in abundance in the Peninsula. In some places they grow wild and in others they are cultivated. Having a life span of one hundred years, <sup>21</sup> they shape the landscape of the region.

Palmyrahs are rightly connected with the Tamils of Jaffna and enter into their "home life in exactly the same way as the coconut is bound up with the life of the Sinhalese". <sup>22</sup> Palmyrah is dedicated to god Vinayagar and hence it is considered sacred. One ascribes innumerable uses to it. The saccharine sap tapped through incisions made in the young fruit and collected in earthenware pots strategically attached to the sheaths of tender fruits contains plenty of vitamins and proteins. It is also prescribed by native physicians as medication for a variety of ailments. When this sweet sap is allowed to ferment, it becomes a wine-like drink called toddy. It is also distilled to make a potent spirit called arrack. Molasses-like sugar called jaggery is made from female palmyrah's toddy by a heating process. A kind of jelly prepared out of palmyrah fruit is called *pinaddu*. <sup>23</sup> The dried *pinaddu* may be prepared into jam by the addition of spices. Its shoots called *panam kizhangu* which are fleshy

stems of plants sprouting from seeds planted in little plots are edible when boiled. The flour derived from the dried shoots called *odiyal* is an ingredient of the "soup" called *kuzh*.

Palmyrah's fan-shaped palms are woven into mats, baskets, umbrellas, head dresses and fans. They also serve as thatch for roofing and fencing. Palm leaves, dried when they are tender, had served as writing material called *ola* before the discovery and use of paper.

The nutritious leaves are good fodder for cattle. Dry leaves and certain other parts of the tree are used to kindle fire.

Palmyrah is used as lumber for buildings. Because of the strength and durability of its trunk, its timber is exported for rafters to other parts of the Island and to South India. An entire house could be built without iron-parts and nails solely from Palmyrah.

In the last century, Palmyrah is claimed to have furnished "one-fourth the means of sustenance for the population of the northern provinces".<sup>24</sup> It is natural, then, to call it a *karpaha* or celestial tree, because all its parts without exception could be used by man.<sup>25</sup>

### Foot Notes

1. Sir James Emerson Tennent maintains that the structure and direction of the mountain system of Sri Lanka "exhibits no traces of submersion". Without rejecting the theory of the birth of the Island from the "mainland of India by a convulsion", he explains the formation of Jaffna in the following manner: "coming laden with alluvial matter collected along the coast of Coromandel and meeting with obstacles south of Point Calimere, they have deposited their burdens on the coral reefs round Point Pedro and then gradually raised above the sea-level and covered deeply with sand drifts". Tennent, James Emerson Sir, **Ceylon. An Account of the Island. Physical Historical and Topographical with Notices of its Natural History, Antiquities and Productions.** Vol. 1. London 1860, pp 12-13
2. Mathanakaran, R., "Appendix I. Study Area: Its Geographical Background" in Ragupathy, Ponnampalam, **Early Settlements in Jaffna. An Archaeological Survey,** Madras 1987, p. 187
3. *Ibid.*, p. 191
4. *Ibid.*

5. Cook, Elsie K., **Ceylon . Its Geography, its Resources and its people**, London 1953, p. 328
6. Mathanakaran, R., **op.cit.**, p. 191
7. **The Ceylon Manual, 1912-1913**, Colombo p. 298
8. Tennent , J. E., **op.cit.**, p. 2
9. Mathanakaran, R., **op.cit.**, p. 193
10. **ibid.**
11. **ibid.**, p. 195
12. **ibid.**, p. 197
13. Tennent, J.E., **op.cit.**, p. 20
14. These are observations made by Mr. Byrne, Govt. surveyor of Northern district, cited **ibid.**, p. 23
15. Tenent, J.E., **op.cit.**, p. 23
16. See Mathanakaran, R., **op.cit.**, p. 198
17. De Silva, S. F., **A Regional Geography of Ceylon**, Colombo 1954, p. 245
18. See Tennent, J.E., **op.cit.**, pp. 87, 123
19. **The Ceylon Manual, 1912-1913**, p. 299
20. A scholar and poet exclaims:  
     Oh, the sweetest thing  
     Of God's creations  
     Are not cake icings,  
     Honey secretions  
     Or refined glucos  
     Or sly sacharines  
     But Jaffna mangoes  
     From arid Terrains.  
     Mahadeva, K., **Poems in Tamil**, Birmingham 1991, p. 30
21. See Anantham, V.V.V., **Makkal Vazhvil Marankal** (Trees in the life of people) Madras 1993, p. 293. De Queyroz refers to "large forests of wild palm trees(palmeyras) much rougher in bark and more straight and not less high than our own cultivated pine." **op.cit.**, p. 52
22. Cook, Elsie K., **op. cit.**, p. 328
23. *Pinaddu* is mentioned as the "chief food" of the inhabitants of Jaffna by De Queyroz. **Op.cit.**, p. 52
24. Tennent, J.E., **op. cit.**, p. 111
25. Anantham, V.V.V., **op.cit.**, p. 293. *Karpaham* is a tree in heaven which is said to yield whatever one desires.

# HISTORY

Scholars who attempt to lift the veil of obscurity that envelops the early (proto -, pre-) history of Jaffna face formidable obstacles: scarcity of literary evidence, very few archaeological findings and biased interpretations of available data.

Unlike the Sinhalese whose ancient chronicles such as the **Mahavamsa** and the **Culavamsa** which give the "Sinhalese a myth about their origin, which farfetched as it is, convinced them that they were a people with something special about them",<sup>1</sup> the Tamils do not possess any such comparable literature. The earliest local Tamil chronicles on Jaffna were composed in the Middle Ages. A prose work entitled **Yazhppana Vaipava Malai** was compiled by poet Mayilvakana Pulavar in 1736 A.D. This work depended on earlier writings such as **Kailaya Malai**, **Vaiya Padal**, **Pararasasekaran Ula** and **Raja Murai**.<sup>2</sup> These, composed not earlier than the fourteenth Century A. D., contain folklore, legends and myths mixed with historical anecdotes.

**Mahavamsa** and **Culavamsa** contain references to Tamils but are rather silent on the early history of Jaffna.<sup>3</sup>

References to Tamils of the North which are said to be found in the Hindu epics of **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**, in the ancient Tamil Classics and in the devotional Tamil literature have yet to be critically studied and appraised.<sup>4</sup>

As far as archaeology is concerned, one may mention four rounds of field work:

Excavations were carried out in 1918 and 1919 at Kantarodai, an ancient capital of Jaffna, and at Vallipuram, a coastal town situated about six kilometers from Point Pedro. Punch-marked coins called *puranas* that were current in India during the time of Buddha (6th to 5th centuries B.C.) and copper rods - "kohl" sticks that were very similar to the ones Egyptians used to paint with and dating back to 2000 B.C. - were discovered. Sir Paul E. Pieris, who conducted these excavations, expressed his conviction that the Northern part of Sri Lanka was a "flourishing settlement" even before the birth of Vijaya, the legendary founder of the Sinhalese.<sup>5</sup>

Excavations carried out in 1956 and 1957 at Pomparippu, Puttalam, a region intimately connected with the North, have revealed the existence of a culture bearing some resemblance to the South Indian Megalithic culture flourishing in the first millennium B.C. discovered at Adicha Nallur in the Tirunelveli region of Tamil Nadu: striking similarities are to be found in the features of Black and Red Rouletted pottery, in iron implements and in the style of urn burials.<sup>6</sup>

Excavations were carried out in 1970 by a Pennsylvania University Museum team at Kantarodai. Though no burial monuments were found, the team reported the probable existence of a Megalithic stage of development in Jaffna.<sup>7</sup>

Excavations were conducted between 1980 and 1983 which witnessed startling discoveries. The following conclusions are mainly based on these excavations.

\*The first inhabitants of Sri Lanka might have migrated through a landbridge that linked up north-western Sri Lanka with south-eastern Tamil Nadu. This land connection physically existed till 7000 B.C.<sup>8</sup> No wonder, scholars have maintained that "man did not evolve in Ceylon but... arrived in the island from the main continent of India"<sup>9</sup> Besides, the close proximity of Jaffna Peninsula to South India must have prompted periodic migration from the sub continent to the northern coastal areas of

Sri Lanka. One could not disagree with the statement of Paul Peiris that "it stands to reason that a country which is only 30 miles from India and which would have been seen by Indian fishermen every morning as they sailed out to catch their fish, would have been occupied as soon as the Continent was peopled by men who understood how to sail".<sup>10</sup> In point of fact, in the course of the centuries, South Indians came to Sri Lanka either as successful traders, seamen, soldiers, artisans or refugees fleeing from political upheavals in their motherland.

\*Jaffna was not the first habitat of the earliest migrants. A few microlithic (an earlier phase) tools were found at Poonakari and Mannittalai, two points very close to, but not inside, the Peninsula. This may have been due to the absence of microlithic tool material there.<sup>11</sup>

\*The earliest inhabitants of Jaffna were Megalithic people. This culture had in general the following distinguishing features: tank-irrigated cultivation, developed settlements, a special pottery technique which produced Black and Red Wares, the introduction of iron technology and a certain style of burial chamber. The urbanization "in South India, the rise of earliest kingdoms and chieftaincies in this region and the refinement of the language to the stage of producing the Cankam Tamil Literature were actually the culmination of the Megalithic culture".<sup>12</sup>

The Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka belonging to the third century B.C., having close affinity with the Tamil Brahmi inscriptions of South India, together with the fact of the similarity of clan names found both in the earliest written records of Sri Lanka and in the ancient Tamil Classics suggest "a common ethnicity between Sri Lanka and extreme peninsular India". The Megalithic culture of Sri Lanka was, however, "a full-fledged and integral part of the cultural heritage of Sri Lanka, common to both Sinhalese and Tamil".<sup>13</sup>

Pottery and a seal found at Anaikoddai and other material found at Kalapumi, Karainagar and Kantarodai establish beyond doubt that there were permanent settlements in the Jaffna Peninsula - at least in the third century B.C. if not earlier.<sup>14</sup>



The Brahmi scripts, found at Anaikodai (and Kantarodai), assigned to third century B.C., occur "along with what could be assumed to be a previous system of writing". This suggests that the "Megalithic culture arrived in Jaffna in the protohistoric times, and caused the emergence of rudimentary settlements and continued into the early historic times marked by urbanization".<sup>15</sup>

\*Jaffna may have offered itself as a habitat for Megalithic people for the following reasons:

- i. Jaffna was a region of scrubs which could have been easily cleared by tools discovered by the developing iron technology
- ii. There was freshwater at low depth and the place abounded with natural ponds.
- iii. The rain-flooded silt stretches and the *taravai* grasslands were suitable for farming and pasturing respectively.
- iv. The lagoons and flood outlets were also conducive for settlements.<sup>16</sup>

\*The earliest inhabitants of Jaffna were culturally "affiliated" to South India, spoke in a proto-dravidian language, and practised a religion "similar to that of the Megalithic south India"; a statuette of Lakshmi, a Hindu goddess, is said to have been found at Anaikodai.<sup>17</sup>

\*Even though it cannot be maintained categorically as the Tamil Tradition claims that the Nagars were the aboriginal inhabitants of Jaffna, one cannot easily dismiss the existence of a people in a region called Naganadu or Nagativu, mentioned, among others, by the Greek geographer Ptolemy. **Cilappathikaram** and **Manimekalai**, the twin classical Epics of the Tamils, mention Naganadu's relations with Kavarippaddinam and a Chola prince respectively. The Pali chronicles of Sri Lanka relate the story of a quarrel between two rulers of Nagadipa. A gold plate belonging to the fifth century A.D. mentions Jaffna as Nagadiva (Nagativu) and states that its regional ruler constructed a Buddhist vihara.<sup>18</sup> The Tamil historiographical works of the Middle Ages mention Katiramalai near Kantarodai as the capital of a ruling dynasty before the establishment of the Kingdom of Jaffna around the mid thirteenth century A.D. It is then reasonable to assume that in the Peninsula there was a

“city-state” in the early Christian era in parallel with “various ruling dynasties in different parts of Sri Lanka before the development of Anuradhapura hegemony”.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, many similarities between the inhabitants of Nagadipa called the Nagars and the Tamils of Jaffna have prompted some scholars to propound that the Tamils of India and Sri Lanka are the “lineal descendants” of the Naga people.<sup>20</sup> According to others, however, our knowledge of these earlier inhabitants is still very “hazy” and hence nothing definite can be said about them.<sup>21</sup> But the weight of scholarly opinion is on the side of those who identify Jaffna with Nagadipa or Nagativu. According to one authority, “Nagadipa, the original name of the island of Jaffna is perhaps derived from the Nagas”.<sup>22</sup> According to another, there “can be no doubt that the earliest commercial intercourse of the Greeks and the Romans with Ceylon was confined to the northern and north western ports”.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one of the ports on the seaboard of the Peninsula, Jambutturai, is thought to be Jambukola from where envoys of Devanampiya Tissa (247-207B.C.) embarked with gifts to Emperor Asoka.<sup>24</sup> According to A.C. Bouquet, the “proto-Dravidians” who were the dwellers in the Indus Valley and who were believers in *nagas* or snake-spirits had entered India and Sri Lanka at a very early age.<sup>25</sup>

\*It is plausible that a common Megalithic cultural stratum in South India caused major cultural formations of Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Tulu, etc., other lesser formations such as the ancient Tamil fivefold social divisions based on the relationship between man and his environment, and “the development of Sinhala and Tamil formations in the Island of Sri Lanka... In the later centuries, the Sinhala- Buddhist formation developed into a major formation on par with other major formations of south India, whereas the Jaffna Tamil formation remained as a lesser formation.”<sup>26</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Jaffna Tamil identity, and indeed the Northern Sri Lankan identity, was distinct from the South Indian Tamil and Sri Lankan Sinhalese formations.

\*On a wider background: it may be useful to point out that it is the considered opinion of many that there were definitely influential Tamils in the North of Sri Lanka at least two hundred years before the Christian era.<sup>27</sup>

Sinhalese tradition records a number of Tamil invasions from South India. In the second century B.C., two Tamils, Sena and Guttaka, are credited to have assumed power over the northern portion of the Island (177-155 B.C.). Another Tamil of "noble descent" from the Chola country, Elara or Ellalan, seized the throne of the Sinhalese king at Anuradhapura and ruled a great part of the Island for 44 years at least as the "supreme ruler of the northern plain", if not the "ruler of a united kingdom".<sup>28</sup> The defeat of this Tamil ruler at the hand of the Sinhalese Dutthagamini is regarded by some as the "first war of liberation against foreigners".<sup>29</sup> In the first century B.C., seven Tamil chiefs, probably from the Pandya kingdom captured the northern part of the Island and administered it for fourteen years. (89-77 B.C.)

\*The evolution of Megalithic settlements in Jaffna saw the birth of a principality in the first century B.C. Kantarodai emerged "as an urbanized central place" which perhaps controlled the other settlements of the Peninsula not only politically, but economically and culturally as well. It had the "widest and the richest early settlement" and was "situated in the most potential agricultural strip of the Peninsula".<sup>30</sup> Ten sites, located mostly along the sea routes, have been identified as belonging to this phase of development and "many of these fresh settlements arose without an agricultural hinterland" indicating that these settlements "had become specialized and interdependent in their activities".<sup>31</sup>

It is during this period just before the advent of the Christian era that Jaffna became a link in the South Asian and transoceanic maritime trade. Two factors contributed to this development:

i. It was a common practice to use coastal passages in sea trade routes and the Roman and Indian ships went through the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Strait crossing Mantai and Pampan to go from the western coast of India to its eastern coast.

ii. The Gulf of Mannar-Palk Strait route was also famous for its pearl and conch shell diving.<sup>32</sup>

\*Emissaries of Sri Lanka went to Rome in the reign of Emperor Claudius (40-54 A.D.). According to Pliny, a freedman of Annus

Placamus, while sailing round Arabia, was caught by a storm and landed in Ceylon at the port of Hippuros. He was taken to the king with whom he stayed for six months. The king thereafter sent an embassy to Rome. The name of the the ambassador-in-chief appears to be Rachias (perhaps Rasiah) and, in the view of J.E.Tennent, he was a representative of the Raja of Jaffna.<sup>33</sup>

\*It was during this phase that Buddhism became “an integral part of the heritage of Jaffna”.<sup>34</sup> (p.32) There are many places in the Jaffna Peninsula whose names are connected with Buddhist *viharas*.<sup>35</sup> The Buddhist remains at Kantarodai, perhaps burial monuments of monks, are found in a group at a specific area with this distinctive feature: the architectural use of coral and limestone. It is interesting to note that the “limestone and coral architectural tradition of Jaffna in fact started with the Buddhist monuments and flourished for nearly two millennia till the advent of concrete”.<sup>36</sup>

According to some, the ambassadors of Buddhism sent by Emperor Asoka landed in the Peninsula.<sup>37</sup>

Buddhism, together with Prakrti, the language of Buddhism that helped to form a homogeneous population in the rest of Sri Lanka, failed to establish a permanent foothold in Jaffna. To be sure, it was able to cohabit or syncretise with the folk - religion (Hinduism) of Jaffna. However, perhaps at the end of the first millennium A.D., many settlements with their Buddhist structures were abandoned.

Buddhism was unable to survive in Jaffna perhaps for two reasons:

\* The “sympathies of the people of the North with the old religion [Hinduism] outlived the reformation [Buddhism] brought to the Island”, and

\* the people of Jaffna were “ in constant communion with their brethren in South India”.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly Pali chronicles which narrate events prior to sixth

century A. D. are “virtually silent about the Peninsula except for certain rare remarks and treat it almost an alien land”.<sup>39</sup>

\*The dark ages of the Jaffna Peninsula may be said to begin soon after the early centuries of the Christian era. At a time when other regional powers were consolidating their position, developing their identity and aspiring to imperialistic dominance, Jaffna underwent “economic and cultural subordination”.<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps significant that no mention is made of Jaffna in the massive bhakti literature of the Tamils of South India.<sup>41</sup>

It is speculated that the following factors contributed to the fate that befell Jaffna:

i. Jaffna could not cope with new developments such as planned deforestation and construction of dams and reservoirs to serve a hydraulic-based economy as was happening in the dry zone of Sri Lanka.

ii. There was a decline in the Roman trade and the ensuing Arab-Chinese trade made use of the port of Mantai which was situated more than sixty miles from Jaffna.

iii. The Anuradhapura hegemony had become a reality.<sup>42</sup>

According to Sinhalese sources, six Tamil rulers seized power in the fifth century extended the authority to the southern most part of the Island and remained in control for twenty six years.

In this period a movement from the coastal area of the Peninsula to the eastern part of the Island may also be observed.<sup>43</sup>

\*The Sinhalese chronicle **Mahavamsa** records that at the death of king Aggrabodhi in 781 A.D., certain chiefs of the northern territory with its people seized the land by force and refused tribute to the king.<sup>44</sup> Though this revolt was crushed by the successor of Aggrabodhi, this event says much about the politically fluid situation prevailing in the country. Tradition preserved by the Portuguese chronicler De Queyroz regarding a form of government by *Vidanes*, *Aratchis* and *Mudaliyars* in Jaffna may also be a pointer to this state of affairs in this period.

According to **Yazhppana Vaipavamalai**, it was in the eighth century that Ugrasinghan, a prince of the dynasty of the legendary Vijaya, coming with an army from India, descended upon Sri Lanka and captured one half of the Island. He established his capital first at Katiramalai, known now as Kantarodai, and then shifted it to Singhai Nagar, a town on the eastern coast of the Jaffna Peninsula. Though the story of Ugrasinghan has generally been rejected by scholars,<sup>45</sup> some are of the view that this story is "based on a historical fact", namely that Ugrasinghan has been confused with Manavamma who was helped by the Pallava King Narasinghavarman. <sup>46</sup>

It is an undeniable fact, however, that Sinhalese kings brought Tamil soldiers from South India, some of whom then began to play the role of king-makers.<sup>47</sup> There was also an influential community of Tamil traders in the Sinhalese kingdom. In addition, inscriptions of the ninth century speak of Tamil settlements in the Northern part of the Island.<sup>48</sup>

During the rule of the Cholas in the eleventh century, the Tamils living in the Island were able to consolidate their positions in the militia and the administration of the Sinhalese kings. It may be assumed that more Tamils settled in the northern region during this period.

In 1215 A.D., Magha of Kalinga conquered the Sinhalese kingdom with its capital in Polonnaruwa with the help of Dravidian soldiers. This invasion weakened the Sinhalese power to such an extent that any semblance of political unity in the Island disappeared.

Some maintain that events following the above invasion contributed to the development of the kingdom of Jaffna.

The fact that the Tamil invaders from South India ruled over the entire region of Nagadipa is significant. One assumes that there was support for them among the people of the Peninsula. Swami Gnana Prakasar's opinion that the people of Nagadipa or Jaffna who were "never fully reconciled to the new belief [Buddhism] which came to be firmly established under Devanampiya Tissa (247-207 B.C.) and who had constant communication with the Tamils of the mainland,... nurtured a spirit of revolt and were only too ready to stretch out a helping hand to

any adventurer who would attempt to curb the sovereign power of the Sinhalese" may offer a clue to the success of some South Indian invasions.<sup>49</sup>

After Magha, the Javakas led by Chandrabhanu came to power with the help of Tamil soldiers from South India and ruled over most of the territory that were previously under Magha.<sup>50</sup> Chandrabhanu became almost a vassal of the Pandyas and was overthrown by them when he refused to send tribute.

As far as Jaffna was concerned, the legendary story of a Chola princess called Marutapuravalli marrying the king of Katiramalai is remembered in the later chronicles. One does not hear any more of Katiramalai, a fact which may point to a change of capitals.

In this period, migration from South India to Jaffna and the mainland of the North called Vanni seems to have been taking place. Pachilaippalli, an arid tract with sandy passes, became a central spot facilitating perhaps migrations to Vanni.<sup>51</sup>

A new type of pottery classed as Grooved Rim Ware appears on the scene. Two Chola inscriptions belonging to the eleventh century, recording the imprisonment of the Sri Lankan King and the grant to a Nallur temple respectively, have been found in the Peninsula.<sup>52</sup>

As far as religion was concerned, a brand of syncretism combining Buddhist beliefs and practices with Tamil Saivism and folk religion took place. Aiyandar was syncretised with Buddha.

In course of time Buddhism was, on the wane. It was perhaps at this juncture that Saiva Siddhanta became the official religion of the Jaffna ruling class.<sup>53</sup>

The eleventh to the fourteenth centuries witnessed a flurry of foreign and local trade. Many coins and Chinese ware of this period, a Tamil inscription of Parakramabahu I found at Nainativu and the observations of the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta (14th century A.D.) about Jaffna corroborate this state of affairs.<sup>54</sup>

By the end of the 13th century and not later than 1325 A.D., the Tamil Kingdom of the North had "come on to the historical scene".<sup>55</sup>

This Tamil Saiva Kingdom, based partly on agrarian and partly on mercantile structure, had as its nucleus Uttaradesa, namely the northern division of Rajarata covering the areas of the northern part of the country.<sup>56</sup>

The Kings of the Kingdom of Jaffna are known by the name of Arya Chakravartis. According to some, the descendants of Arya Chakravarti, a chieftain from the Pandya kingdom who became ruler of the northern part of the Island towards the end of the thirteenth century, came to be known as Arya Chakravartis.<sup>57</sup> According to others, Jayabahu, who ruled the North while Magha ruled from Polonnaruwa, was probably the founder of the Arya rulers of the North. These rulers were originally a branch of the Ganga dynasty from Kalinga who had immigrated to Rameshvaram, South India, and had intermingled with the Brahmins of the area. It was to highlight their connection with the highest caste that they called themselves Aryas.<sup>58</sup> Another school holds that Singhai Aryan, also known as Kulankaic Chakravarti, was the founder of the line of Arya Chakravartis. He was none other than Magha, alias Kalinga Magha, alias Kalinga Vijayabahu, who conquered Polonnaruwa in 1215.<sup>59</sup>

The centre of power of the northern Kingdom was the Jaffna Peninsula and hence it was known by the name of the Kingdom of Jaffna. Ibn Battuta, the Arab traveller who visited the capital in 1344 A.D. states that the Tamil King's power extended up to Puttalam and that he was in control of the pearl fishery.

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the army of the Tamil King had penetrated as far south as Gampola and had driven the reigning Sinhalese King from his capital.

In the fifteenth century, however, there was a brief Sinhalese revival and the Kingdom of Jaffna was under Sinhalese rule for about seventeen years till the defeated Tamil King reconquered his kingdom with the help of the Tamil military chiefs from South India.



Under the Vijaya Nagara Empire of South India, the Tamil Kingdom became its tributary and there followed a protective relationship. After its decline, Jaffna came under the sway of Tanjore and Madurai, two centres of power that succeeded the former Empire.

It is appropriate here to mention four factors which contributed to the growth of the Tamil Kingdom.

In the first place, there was internecine dissension and discord among the Sinhalese rulers. As a result, they became weak to the extent that they had to pay tribute to the northern Kingdom.

In the second place, the fall of Polonnaruwa meant that irrigation works of the north central plain in the dry zone had to be abandoned and the area was left to develop into a jungle. This created a no-man's land which became an effective barrier between the Kingdom of Jaffna and the Sinhalese Kingdom.

In the third place, there was a vacuum of a competent imperial power during the period between the decline of the Cholas and the appearance of the Vijaya Nagara Empire.

In the fourth place, there was an influx of immigrants from South India to the only Tamil Kingdom in existence at the time, namely the Kingdom of Jaffna. This exodus took place, because

- a. Tamils of South India had lost their last remaining state, the Pandya Kingdom, due to Islamic invasion in 1334 A..D.; and
- b. The Vijaya Nagara Empire was, in a way, a foreign power, since the tax collectors and military chiefs were Telegu lords. The high cast Vellalars, who wielded influence and power locally, were infuriated and deemed it fit to abandon their motherland, South India.

It may be appropriate to mention in this connection that whereas the settlers in Jaffna before the eleventh century are said to have come mostly from Kerala (Malabar),<sup>60</sup> the immigrants of the Chola and Vijaya Nagara periods seem to have come from the eastern part of South India.

In many ways, the period extending from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries may be characterized as the Golden Age of the Tamils of Jaffna.

The capital of the Kings of Jaffna was Nallur. They resided at Kopay and ruled directly over the entire Peninsula and the neighbouring Islands together with the Island of Mannar and a portion of the mainland. Other territories in the North and the East were administered by hereditary chiefs called Vanniyars who paid obeisance and tribute to the king.

Kings assumed the alternate throne names Segarajasekaran and Pararajasekaran, and used the epithets Singaiyariyan (Lord of Singaingar, the earlier capital of the Kingdom of Jaffna), Setukavalan (Guardian of Setu or Rameshavaram) and Gangainadan (belonging to the country of the Ganges).

Their emblems were a recumbent bull *-nanthi-*, a Saiva symbol, and the expression Setu, indicating the place of their origin, Rameshvaram. The term *setu* was also used as an expression of benediction. These two emblems were also designed on their coins.

At the height of their power, the Kings had nearly 20,000 soldiers.<sup>61</sup> This military prowess enabled them to conduct warfare against the Sinhalese Kings of the South during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The naval power of the Kings was such that they were able to establish military outposts in such distant places in the Island as Chilaw, Negombo and Colombo. Ibn Battuta testifies that he saw hundreds of ships belonging to the King of Jaffna on the Coromandel coast of South India. It is reasonable to assume that this large fleet was used not only to transport goods but also soldiers. This naval strength of the Kings of Jaffna helped them to achieve a number of objectives:

- \* to control the Palk Strait and the pearl fisheries in the Gulf of Mannar.
- \* to cross over to South India when circumstances forced them to, and
- \* to make military expeditions along the sea into the areas of the Sinhalese.

The Kingdom of Jaffna, which was divided into various provinces with subdivisions of *parrus* (literally meaning property) or larger territorial units and *ur* or villages, the smallest unit, was administered on a "hierarchical and regional basis".<sup>62</sup>

At the summit was the King whose kingship was hereditary; he was usually succeeded by his eldest son.

Next in the hierarchy stood the *adikaris* who were the provincial administrators.

Then came the *mudaliyars* who functioned as judges and interpreters of the laws and customs of the land. It was also their duty to gather information of whatever was happening in the provinces and report to higher authorities.

Administrators of revenues called *kankanis* (superintendents) and *kanakkappillais* (accountants) came next in line. The latter had to keep records and maintain accounts.

*Maniyam* was the chief of the *parrus*. He was assisted by *mudaliyars* who were in turn assisted by *udaiyars*, persons of authority over a village or a group of villages. They were the custodians of law and order and gave assistance to survey land and collect revenues in the area under their control.

The village headman was called *talaiyari*, *paddankaddi* or *adappanar* and he assisted in the collection of taxes and was responsible for the maintainance of order in his territorial unit.

It may be mentioned in passing that each caste had a chief who supervised the performance of caste obligations and duties.

All these officials had an audience with the King called *varicai* twice an year. Presents such as plantains, fowls and butter were given to the sovereign in the name of the people under their administration. This assemblage offered an opportunity, on the one hand, for the King to receive information on various aspects of life in all parts of his kingdom and to ensure the continued allegiance of his subordinates who were either

appointed or approved by him, and, on the other hand, for the territorial administrators entrusted to work for the common good to present petitions and requests on behalf of their people. <sup>63</sup>

As far as the taxes levied by the King were concerned, the following were collected:

Land tax - paid partly in money and partly in kind, included

House tax

Garden tax- on compounds where, among others, plantain trees, coconut and arecanut palms were grown and irrigated by water from the well, and

Tree tax- on such trees as palmyrah, margosa and *iluppai*

Poll tax- it was called *talaivari* and collected from each individual

Professional tax- collected from members of each caste, and

Commercial taxes- consisting of, among others,

\*the stamp duty on clothes (clothes could not be sold privately and had to have official stamp)

\**taraku* or levy on items of food, and

\*port and customs duties.

Columbuthurai, which connects the Peninsula with the mainland at Poonakari with its ferry services, was the chief port, and there were customs check posts at the sand passes of Pachilaippalai. <sup>64</sup>

Perhaps a peculiarity of Jaffna was the levy of licence fee for the cremation of the dead <sup>65</sup>

All citizens of the Kingdom, with the exception of the old and the infirm, had to perform certain community services called *uliyam*. such as the construction of granaries and roads, loan of beasts of burden, beating of drums for officials who travelled from one part of the Kingdom to the other and provision of water and fire wood. *Uliyam* was "a means of mobilising resources for works of public utility and the royal establishments". <sup>66</sup>

A significant feature of the collection of revenues in the Kingdom of Jaffna was the fact that the revenues were collected in money and the officials were paid in cash, proving that there was a “considerable monetary circulation”. Indeed, in this respect, the Kingdom of Jaffna “had reached a development higher than that found in the Southwestern and Central parts of the Island”.<sup>67</sup>

During this period, the Tamils of the North and East began to develop a distinctive social structure and cultural tradition of their own. Most of these were later collected into a code of laws called *Tesavalamai* or *Nadduvalamai*.

Jaffna developed into a major trading centre. This might have been due to the imaginative efforts of the rulers who, seeing that revenues from land and other sources were limited, devised ingenious methods of collecting substantial income from commercial activities. They “exercised a monopolistic control over the trade of some important items and organised fleets for transporting merchandise to foreign countries”. In the fourteenth century, exploiting the political weakness of the Sinhalese Kings, the rulers of Jaffna “seem to have succeeded in directing the flow of supplies in cinnamon through a port under their control”.<sup>68</sup>

New ports came into being and the old ones were expanded. Kayts became a centre for ship-building and ship-repairing.

Pearl fishery off the coast of Mannar was in the hands of the King. Elephants from the Vanni region were exported from Jaffna to India. Traders were also present in the southern parts of the Island. It is a tribute to the trading expertise of the Tamils of the Kingdom of Jaffna that an inscription of a Chinese admiral named Chen Ho is found in three languages: Chinese, Persian and Tamil.<sup>69</sup>

Many industries flourished. Dyeing with *chaya* root was a notable occupation. A class of people became experts in digging up large quantities of *chaya* root in the Islands of Delft and Karaitivu and in the mainland villages such as Chulipuram and Ilavalai, and this occupation became their trade.

Another caste of people called Chayakkarar (dyers) dyed new clothes.

Women were engaged in cotton industry.

Palmyrah leaves were dyed with bark from trees such as blackberry (*naval*) and tulip to obtain purple *olas* or leaves. These were used for decorative designs in the production of mat and basket.

Weaving was a hereditary industry. Vannarpannai was one of the major centres of weaving in the Peninsula. Silk worms were reared for the purpose of weaving silk clothes.

Rope making from the fibres of Palmyrah and the barks of *arththy* was also a flourishing industry.<sup>70</sup>

Saivism was elevated to the status of the kingdom's official religion. Kandaswamy temple in Nallur was the royal temple while the temple at Vallipuram near Point Pedro became popular.

The temple was the centre around which an *ur* or village was built. It is an accepted axiom of the Tamils that one should not live at a place where is no temple.

It is true to say that in the field of architecture, no original tradition developed partly because of the constant wars and partly because of the vital link with South India. Temples built during this period exhibit a special feature: ornamented and expensively sculptured tower called *gopuram* at their entrance.

In the field of education, both temple schools and village schools under schoolmasters were engaged in the task of imparting basic education.

In the literary sphere, an Academy of Tamil Literature was founded at Nallur in the fifteenth century by the King. Kings, some of whom were poets of no mean calibre, were patrons of writers and poets.

Study of medicine and astrology was greatly encouraged and the native system of medicine called *siddha*, considered best suited to the climatic conditions of Jaffna, flourished.

All in all, before the conquest of Jaffna by the Portuguese, the Tamils of the North with their centre in the Jaffna Peninsula were living in a well-defined area "which they had carved out as their permanent home".<sup>71</sup> To bolster their identity, they had developed distinctive social structures, economic institutions and a way of life which they could call their own.

The conquest of Jaffna by the Portuguese under Captain General Constantine de Sa in 1620-21 spelt the demise of the independent Kingdom of Jaffna and the beginning of subjugation under colonial rulers.

The Portuguese who had conquered the Sinhalese Kingdom of Kotte in 1505 did not show much interest in Jaffna initially because Jaffna did not produce those commodities which the Portuguese were keenly interested in. In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, they became aware of the strategic importance of Jaffna. In the first place, a stronghold in Jaffna would give Portuguese complete control over trade and shipping within a triangle comprising Chilaw, Cape Comorin and Palk Strait. Secondly, Jaffna Peninsula served as transit route through which the King of Kandy, who displayed strong resistance to the Portuguese, received military reinforcements from South India. This appraisal of Jaffna as a passageway to the South haunted the Portuguese right throughout their rule. Thirdly, Jaffna was not altogether devoid of resources. It was a trade centre of elephants. Urukathurai, earlier known as Uratota, was the port to which elephants from other parts of the Island were brought and shipped abroad. Interestingly enough the present name of Kayts comes from the Portuguese: *Caes dos elefantes*-namely elephants guay.<sup>72</sup>

A pretext to capture Jaffna presented itself when the King of Jaffna, Sekarasasekaran VII, known as Sankili, cruelly murdered about six hundred newly baptised Catholics in the island of Mannar. Constantine de Braganza led an expedition to Mannar in 1560 and captured it. Sankili sued for peace and promised to pay tribute, so that the King could remain independent.<sup>73</sup>

But the tributary status came to an end with the defeat and the death of the Tamil King Puviraja Pandaram Pararajasingham in 1591. The latter had attacked the Portuguese in Mannar with the help of the forces of Nayak of Tanjore. Besides, the Kings of Jaffna had obstructed the missionary work of conversion undertaken by the Portuguese and, what more, had aided the King of Kandy to obtain help from South India. Edirmanasingham, the son of the former King, was installed as the new ruler. Thus started a period of Portugal-Jaffna clientship.

The newly appointed ruler, however, was sucked into the power struggle between the Nayak of Tanjore and the Portuguese. In 1620, the last ruler of Jaffna, Sankilian II, was captured and in the following years Jaffna became part of Portugal's Overseas Empire.

As a result of this annexation, Portuguese became supreme in the Palk Strait and were able to control the lucrative trade off the pearl fisheries in the Gulf of Mannar. Jaffna Patnam ( as they called it ) was maintained as a separate entity from their other maritime possessions. Though the Portuguese followed the traditional system of administration, they heaped periodically tax burdens upon the people to the extent that these were "reduced to the almost misery."<sup>74</sup>

In sharp contrast to the number of forts in the South, they built only one in Jaffna town and another one at Kayts. This lack of enthusiasm to strengthen their position militarily may be due to their conviction that the people of Jaffna were "weak", "quiet and mild" and not prone to rebellion without outside help.<sup>75</sup>

The main contribution of Portuguese rule in Jaffna was the introduction of Roman Catholicism. Such a firm foundation of Catholicism was laid that the Church became, and still continues to be, a powerful, influential and healthy force in the life of the Tamils of the Peninsula.

Regrettably the Portuguese wantonly destroyed quite a number of Hindu temples and introduced many other measures against the Hindus.

In 1658 Mannar was captured by the Dutch. From there, they marched through the jungle lands of the Vanni and crossed over to the Peninsula at Poonakari. The Portuguese were trapped in the Jaffna fort and surrendered on 24 June.



The new rulers took interest in developing the resources of the land. Self-sufficiency in food was their prime aim. They got down thousands of slaves to work in the fields. While repairing the Kaddukkarai tank, renamed Giant's tank because of its size, in the Mantote area outside the Peninsula; they encouraged the people of Jaffna to settle in Poonakari as cultivators.

Numerous wells were repaired in the Peninsula and the dwindling number of cattle was replaced by importing some from India.

Many industries such as weaving and rope-making were greatly encouraged.<sup>76</sup>

A colony of Andhra weavers was brought from India and settled in Jaffna.

A land register called *tombo* was started. The system of land tenure was fixed.

The customary laws of Jaffna called *Tesavalami* was codified and promulgated. Tamil *Mudaliyars* were appointed over the four divisions of the Peninsula. The famous Dutch Fort in Jaffna which has become newsworthy in the last few years was built.

They were very harsh towards Roman Catholics and used all means at their disposal to suppress the Catholic Church.

An interesting memorial of their rule is the Dutch names for the islands lying off the Peninsula. Karaitivu became Amsterdam; Anailaitivu, Rotterdam; Nainativu, Harlem; Pungudutivu, Middleburgh; Neduntivu, Delft; and Velanai, Leyden. Another souvenir of their occupation of Jaffna may lie in the name of a cemetery "studded with the most expensive and extravagant old monuments" called Jaffna in Delft, Holland. The "best of Aristocrats" are buried in that cemetery.<sup>77</sup>

It is important to note that, following the practice of the Portuguese, the Dutch too administered Jaffna as a separate entity without amalgamating it with their two Sinhalese possessions.

The Dutch Fort was the first to fall to the British in 1796. The Dutch ceded all their possessions in Sri Lanka to the British in 1802 by the Treaty of Amiens. It is to be remembered, however, that even earlier contacts between the Kandyan King and the English in Madras had taken place by way of Jaffna.

The British maintained the separate identity of the Tamil area until 1833. In that year, the British unified the Tamil regions with the Sinhalese areas for the purpose of administration, spelling an end to the "autonomous existence" of the Tamil regions<sup>78</sup> and forming a "single political authority - the government of Ceylon"<sup>79</sup>

It is a valid assertion that "throughout the British colonial period, the Sinhalese and the Tamil people remained equal in their subordination to the British raj."<sup>80</sup>

The advent of the British ushered in an era of modernisation for Sri Lanka. Free education was introduced and those who benefitted most from this were the people of Jaffna. Young men were able to enter the civil, clerical and professional services in large numbers. In 1948, when the country was granted independence, the Tamils, mostly from the North, occupied roughly thirty percent of all posts available in government services. At the University of Ceylon, too, more than one fourth of the places was occupied by the Tamils.

Certain events after Independence have made such a phenomenal impact on both communities of Sinhalese and Tamils psychologically that it has become almost impossible for them to live together as free and equal citizens of a modern nation. In a climate of conflict and confrontation between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, Jaffna has come to symbolise struggle, liberation and Tamil nationalism. Proclamation of Sinhala as the Official Language of Sri Lanka, the planned colonization with Sinhalese settlers of areas considered part of the Tamil "Homeland", the introduction of a quota system for University admission, riots and pogroms against the Tamils living in Sinhalese areas, and the militarisation of the East and the North by successive Sinhalese governments, among others, have contributed, so the Tamils argue, to the present tragedy. In the words of a writer, the above-mentioned events have led

the "young Tamils in Jaffna, who, feeling the brunt of discrimination, deprivation of language rights and the indignity of living as aliens in their own country, have taken up arms in the struggle for liberation and for a separate Tamil state of Eelam in the North and East of Sri Lanka".<sup>81</sup>

If the measures adopted by successive Sri Lankan governments had contributed negatively to the alienation of the Tamils, there were other factors which positively kindled the emergence of a cultural and linguistic consciousness among them.

The Hindu religious revival, social renewal and regional politics based on language and culture in India which produced movements such as the Arya Samaj, Swadeshi Movement and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam had their share in the awakening of a distinct Tamil consciousness in Sri Lanka.

Scholars maintain that this awakening started as a religious revival during the time of Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), which in course of time began to take the shape more of a literary renaissance. It is significant that eminent Jaffna Tamils such as C.W. Tamotarampillai and Visvanathapillai not only contributed to the revival of Tamil awareness in South India, but also dominated the literary scene of the time.

Scholars, both Indian and Jaffnese, underlined the excellence of Tamil language, its self-sufficiency and the need to be proud of being heirs to the glorious heritage of the culture of the Tamils. Tamil Classics were critically edited and original works such as **Manonmaniam** by Professor P. Sundarampillai were published. Journals such as **Sindhanta Deepika-The Light of Truth** (1897-1913) and the **Tamilian Antiquary** (1907-1914) commanded the day in their fields.

In Jaffna, a Tamil Academy was established in 1898 and conferences on Tamil Language and Literature were held in many places. At one such conference held in 1922, many Tamil scholars from India were invited to take part. In the same year, the Arya Dravida Basha Development Society was inaugurated.

In the field of Fine Arts, *Carnatic* Music and *Bharata Natyam* were proclaimed divine arts and measures were taken to foster them.

In this process of self-assertion, three significant features may be observed:

Firstly, although an aspect of the Tamil Renaissance was the acceptance of Saivism in the form of Saiva Siddhanta as the ancient and the indigenous religion of the Tamils, there were quite a number of Christian scholars who were involved in this movement. Indeed, one may maintain that the process of Tamil Renaissance was originated by, among others, De Nobili, Constantine Beschi and Robert Caldwell - all foreign Christian missionaries and scholars. In course of time, eminent Christians took leading roles: Savariroya Pillai, L. D. Swami Kannupillai, T. Isaac Tambyah, Swami S. Gnana Prakasar and in our days X.S. Thaninayagam Adikal. Hence the "Tamil ethnic identity remains linguistic and cultural", in sharp contrast to the "all inclusive ethno religious identity of the Sinhalese Buddhists"<sup>82</sup>

The second striking feature is the fact that those who were involved in this process belonged initially to the higher echelons of Tamil society. The traditionally oppressed classes were left out. In course of time, however, the lower castes "ushered in new experiences and visions into fiction, poetry and drama using hitherto unheard of dialects, idioms and expressions".<sup>83</sup>

The final feature is the importance the past and present history of the Tamils in Sri Lanka assumed in the middle of the present century. Works such as **Sankili** (1956) a historical play by K. Kanapathipillai, **Tamils and Ceylon** (1958) by C. S. Navaratnam, **Tamil Culture in Ceylon** (1962) by M.D. Raghavan, **The Tamils in Early Ceylon** (1964) by C. Sivaratnam, were pointers to the growing self-consciousness of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. **Tamil Culture**, a journal edited by X. S. Thaninayagam Adikal, also played a momentous role in this process.

In conclusion, it may not be out of place to document the depth of the awareness of Tamil identity in the North ( and East ) in the first half of the nineties: the quantity and quality of output in the fields of literature, performing and fine arts were experiential, impressive and perhaps superior in certain respects to those that came from South India during this period.

## Foot Notes

1. Farmer, B. H., **Ceylon A Divided Nation**, London 1963, p. 6
2. Rasanayagam, C., Mudaliyar, **op.cit.**, p. xx
3. **Dipavamsa** and **Mahavamsa** treat the Tamils as "invaders, vandals, marauders and heathens". Ponnambalam, Satchi, **Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle**, London 1983, p.15
4. See Raghavan, M.D., **op.cit.**, Appendix to ChapII; Rasanayagam, C., **op.cit.**, pp. 1-44; Navaratnam, C.S., **Tamils and Ceylon**, Jaffna 1958, pp. 42-85
5. Pieris, Paul, E., "Nagadipa and Buddhist Remains in Jaffna" in **Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (C.B)** vol. XXVIII, no 12. p. 68
6. De Silva, K. M., **A History of Sri Lanka**, New Delhi 1981, pp. 12-13
7. Ragupathy, Ponnambalam, **op.cit.**, pp. 180-181
8. **ibid.**, p. 179
9. Wijsekera, N. D., **The People of Ceylon**, Colombo 1965, p. 25.
10. Pieris, Paul, E., **op.cit.**, p. 68
11. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 179
12. **ibid.**, p. 180
13. **ibid.**
14. **ibid.**, p. 181 "The C14 dates recently received for the Pennsylvania University excavation samples from Kantarodai, range around 500 B.C. The dates for two of the samples out of fifteen, even go back to the second millennium B.C., but we are sceptical about them". **Ibid.**
15. **ibid.**
16. **ibid.**
17. **ibid.**, p. 182; Ponnambalam, S., **op.cit.** , p. 18
18. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 183
19. **ibid.**
20. Ponnambalam, S., **op.cit.** , p. 6
21. De Silva, K. M., **op.cit.**, p. 6
22. Pillay, K. K., **op.cit.**, p. 6
23. Casie Chetty, S., cited in Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, p. 46

24. Raghavan, M.D., **op.cit.**, p. 62
25. See Cartman, James, **Hinduism in Ceylon**, Colombo 1957, p. 3. Footnote 8
26. Ragupathy P. **op.cit.**, p. 182
27. A Tamil house holders' terrace inscription mentions the names of six Tamil benefactors who contributed to the construction of a Buddhist monument; two short inscriptions in the Vavuniya district ( Periya Puliyankulam ) mention Vishaka, a Tamil trader. See Pathmanathan., S., **op.cit.**, p. 9
28. De Silva, K. M., **op.cit.**, p. 15
29. Weerasooriya, N.E., **Ceylon and her people**, Colombo, 1970, p. 312. Some Sinhalese generals fought against Duthagami on the side of Elara.
30. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 183
31. **Ibid.**, p. 182
32. **Ibid.**
33. See Isaac Tambyah, T., **Psalms of a Saiva Saint. Being selections from the Writings of Tayumanaswamy**, London 1925, p.iii; see also De Queyroz, F., **op.cit.**, p. 14 ; Codrington, H. W., **A Short History of Ceylon**, London 1926, p. 5
34. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 184
35. E.g. Culipuram for Suhu Vehera, Tolpuram for Tula Vehera. The name Poiddy is, according to Swami Gnana Prakasar, a contraction of Bo Hittiya. See Gnana Prakasar, S., "The Tamils Turn Sinhalese" in **Tamil Culture** Vol 1. No.2 (1952) p. 141, Footnote 11. *Puram* actually means a walled settlement, and Culipuram stands for Cholapuram and Tolpuram for old settlement.
36. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 184
37. **Ibid.**
38. See Gnana Prakasar, S., "The Tamils turn Sinhalese", **op.cit.**, p 142
39. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 184
40. **Ibid.**
41. Tirugnanasampantar and Sundarmurti Nayanmars sang hymns on the temples of Thirukkettisvaram ( Mantai ) and Trincomalee but not on those of Jaffna.
42. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 184
43. Arasaratnam, S., **Ceylon**, New Jersey 1964, pp. 101-102
44. **Mahavamsa**, XLVIII, 83-85
45. Pathmanathan, S., **op.cit.**, p. 162

46. Gnana Prakasar, S., "Beginnings of Tamil Rule in Ceylon" in **Tamil Culture**, Vol. 1. Nos. 3 & 4 (1952), pp. 218-219
47. Pathmanathan, S., **op.cit.**, p. 24
48. An Inscription of King Kassappa IV (898-914) refers to a Tamil settlement in the Valviti division of the Northern Province.  
See **ibid.**, pp. 26-27
49. Gnana Prakasar, S., "Beginnings of Tamil Rule", **op.cit.**, pp. 218-219
50. There seems to be some evidence establishing the connection between the Malay-Indonesian regions and Jaffna. **Manimekalai**, the Tamil Classic, speaks of trade between Java and South India and mentions Manipallabam, which, it is assumed, was in the vicinity of Jaffna (perhaps Karainagar). Place names such as Chavakacheri, and Chavankoddai, sports like the flying of kite and the presence of the descendants of Malays in Sri Lanka have prompted some scholars to state that "references to the Malays and to the Javanese soldiers and the part they played in the story of Jaffna and the rest of the Island are facts of Ceylon history". Raghavan, M.D., **op.cit.**, p. 280
51. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 185
52. **ibid**
53. **ibid.**
54. **ibid.**
55. Arasaratnam S., **op.cit.**, p. 204
56. In ancient times the division of Sri Lanka was fourfold: Nagadipa (coinciding with Rajarata) Kalyani, Rohana and Malaya. In mediaeval times, it was divided into three parts called *ratas*, meaning countries: Rajarata, Mahayarata and Ruhuna. See Gana Prakasar, S., "Beginnings of Tamil Rule in Ceylon", **op.cit** p. 213
57. Pathmanathan, S., **op.cit.**, p. 204
58. Arasaratnam, S., **op.cit.**, p. 104
59. Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, 108-109
60. The wide, intimate and striking similarities on various levels between the Tamils of Jaffna and the people of Kerala cannot lightly be dismissed. Names of places (eg. Nagerkovil), wearing of certain ornaments and garments, the manner food is prepared, construction of houses, ceremonies related to pollution, the code of social customs, use of words and phrases etc. are outstanding examples of Jaffna - Malabar connections.
61. Mercenaries from South India were Tamil, Tuluva, Kannada and Malayala warriors.
62. Pathmanathan, Ci ( S ), "Ethnic Identities in Mediaeval Sri Lanka. Tamil

63. **Ibid.**, p. 38
64. **Ibid.**, p. 40
65. Pillay, K.K., **op.cit.**, pp. 156-157
66. Pathmanathan, Ci, "Ethnic Identities", in **op.cit.**, p. 41
67. **Ibid.**, p. 39
68. **Ibid.**, p. 36
69. The Tamil merchants were present in large numbers in Galle where the above-mentioned inscription was found. See Arasaratnam, S., **op.cit.**, p. 107
70. See Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, pp. 202-203
71. Arasaratnam S., **op.cit.**, p. 115. The East is often not mentioned because our discussion is mostly confined to the Peninsula
72. Abeyasinghe, Tikiri, **Jaffna Under the Portuguese**, Colombo 1986. pp. 1-2
73. It is certain that in 1582 the King of Jaffna had begun to pay an annual tribute of 10 elephants or their cash value to the Portuguese. **Ibid.**, p. 2
74. **Ibid.**, p. 63
75. **Ibid.**, pp. 17, 62. For the administration of the two forts, see Pieris, P.E., **The Kingdom of Jaffnapatam 1645**. Being an Account of its administrative organisation as defined from the Portuguese Archives, New Delhi 1995 <sup>2</sup>
76. Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, p. 45
77. Raghavan, M.D., **op.cit.**, p. 105
78. Meyer, E., "Seeking the roots of the Tragedy in Sri Lanka" in **Change and Crisis**, Manor, James (editor), p. 147. Gananath Obeyesekere, contributing in the same Volume under the title "Origins and Institutionalisation of Political Violence", comments that the "call for a separate state of Tamil-speaking peoples" is a "contemporary historical phenomenon". He admits, however, that among the "several contending kingdoms in the country" when the Portuguese arrived "there was also a Tamil Hindu kingdom of Jaffna". **Op.cit.**, p. 115
79. Ponnambalam, S., **op.cit.**, p. 29.
80. **Ibid.**, p. 30
81. **Ibid.**, p. 33
82. Kailasapathy, K., "Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil community" in **Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka**, Dehiwala 1985, p. 174.



## SETTLEMENTS

“The Jaffna Peninsula is one of the most remarkable settlements in South Asia. The Tamil inhabitants are strongly individual in character, and the region is comparable with parts of Holland, where the people seem to be so much more important than the land itself”.<sup>1</sup>

The above assessment of an scholar contains more than a modicum of truth.

At the end of the eighties, the number of inhabitants of the Peninsula was put at 750,000.<sup>2</sup>

Though the population density per square mile is only 331, concentration of population in arable lands and in fishing areas is very heavy. The density of population per square mile of cultivated land is 1616, the highest in the Island <sup>2</sup>

Thenmarachi, an area mostly of barren lands with sandy stretches and alkaline soil but also of grey loam soil, has 400 to 500 persons per square mile. However, in the grey loam area the figure goes up to 1000 person per square mile. Valikamam East, an area consisting of both barrenlands bordering the lagoon and of red soil, has 500 to 1000 people per square mile in the area near the lagoon and more than 4000 people in the red soil area.

Valikamam North, Valikamam West and Vadamarachi West, the first two areas containing lands of intensive cultivation, and the last area containing limestone wastes and grey loam soil, have 1000 to 2000 persons per square mile in general and 5000 in the cultivated areas of Valikamam North and Vadamarachi West. In the cultivated areas of Valikamam West, the density is 2000 persons per square mile. Pachilaippalai, teeming with malarial mosquitos, has merely 275 persons per square mile of the cultivated area.

The Jaffna town and surrounding area (Jaffna division) have more than 4000 persons per square mile. This density is due no doubt to the fact that the town is not only the administrative and cultural capital, but also the market and business centre of the entire Peninsula.<sup>3</sup> In 1993 the total population stood at 133,000.<sup>4</sup> Fishing settlements are to be found in the Northern and Eastern coasts of the Peninsula. Population in the fishing areas near the Jaffna town such as Navanthurai, Gurunagar and Passaiyur is extremely dense.

Kayts, which guards the sea entry to Jaffna and is also the gateway to the Islands, together with Kankesanturai, Valvettiturai and Point Pedro constitute the seaports of the Peninsula, with open, non-sheltered, harbours. Valvettiturai, the birth place of Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the L.T.T.E, has marine grottos and caverns overflowing with marine fossils. These grottos were used by sea pirates in the middle ages. In the early and middle parts of this century, Valvettiturai had also gained reputation as a smuggling area.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the agricultural settlements may be termed rural. Houses are to be found on the margins of gardens and are "strung like beads along the road".<sup>6</sup> Where paddy and coconut are cultivated, houses are found in groups forming villages.

The tendency of the people of Jaffna to build houses along roads and even along railway tracks has intrigued some scholars. It has surprised them because of the "closed nature of the average Tamils dwelling".<sup>7</sup> In point of fact, houses are shut off behind a fence of Palmyrah or cadjian leaves; the fence is supported by the live tulip trees (*surya*) that have thick foliage; to enter the house, one has to open a

hinged gate. However, it is a known fact that almost every inch of available land is made use of in one way or the other and that most people are prepared to shed their blood just for an inch of land.

### Foot Notes

1. Cook, Elsie, K., **op.cit.**, p. 327
2. According to Fischer Weltalmanac, Jaffna town's population stood at 129,000 in very recent times; the number of people who left the Peninsula due to the military offensive of 1996 was 500,000. See, **Der Fischer Weltalmanac**, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp.603-605. At the end of 1996, it is estimated that there are nearly 250,000 in the entire Peninsula.
3. See, De Silva, S. F., **op.cit.**, p. 257  
This section is mostly dependent for statistics on this work .
4. Chunnakam, Chavakachcheri and Kodikamam have also become market centres of the Peninsula.
5. See **Dictionnaire Hachette Encyclopedique Illustre**, Paris 1994, p. 997
5. Raghavan, M.D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 51
6. De Silva, S.F., **op.cit.**, p. 263
7. **Ibid.**, p. 309

## OCCUPATIONS

### Agriculture.

Agriculture is the most important occupation in the Peninsula.

Arable land, which amounts to only a little more than one fourth of the Peninsula, may be divided into dry, wet and garden lands.

Dry land is infertile. However, dry grains like *kurakkan*, *varahu* and certain yams are cultivated there.

Wet land, corresponding to the paddy lands of the Peninsula including the Islands of Delft, Kayts and Karaitivu, has grey loam soil and depends mostly on rain water. Fields are ploughed and manured before the arrival of the north-east monsoon in September. With the first rainfall, paddy grains (*vitai nellu*) are sown so that paddy plants might grow during the wet months, for it is well known that paddy needs plenty of water. Paddy grain ripen during the dry and sunny weather beginning in January and are ready for harvest in February. Those fields that can be irrigated by water from wells are once again ploughed and manured to cultivate chillies, brinjals, manioc and plantain trees. Since it does not rain normally during the dry period, chillies and brinjals need to be regularly watered. There is an interesting observation to be made regarding the cultivation of manioc and plantain trees: Manioc cutting is planted in a vertical position and only one shoot is allowed to develop and the rest are done away with so that by destroying unnecessary growth the plant is harnessed to produce more yams. The same method is applied to the cultivation of plantain trees whereby each tree is not allowed to grow more

than two suckers; the purpose of this exercise is to make sure that the plantain fruits will be of a bigger size.

Garden land, almost identical with red soil land, is where tobacco is grown. The cultivation of tobacco, which is said to have been the "most important industry of the small Jaffna cultivator" already in the early part of this century,<sup>1</sup> need well-manured fields. Since the soils of the garden land lack humus, they have to be ploughed and manured. Fields are ploughed more than once before the start of the north-east monsoon in such a manner that the manure gets well mixed with the tilled soil. Both green manure from leaves and trees and cattle or sheep dung are used. At times fields are manured by penning cattle, goats and sheep. Seedlings that were grown in well-prepared nurseries are transplanted around December in different plots. They are then watered regularly from wells (if there is no sufficient rain water) in the early mornings and late afternoons. Irrigation during the dry season is an absolute necessity. Except those that are needed for seeds, all other plants are topped at a height of nearly four feet and are harvested before they turn yellow. This takes place in March -April. The entire plant is allowed to "quail" for a day in the hot sun and individual leaves are then separated and put in an open shed to wither. After fermentation, tobacco is smoked over a fire made by burning husks and palmyrah nuts.<sup>2</sup>

Three types of tobacco are cultivated in Jaffna:

*Thadjan*, out of which cigars are made; it is also sold as the "Jaffna cheroot" (*curuddu*) to the local manufacturers (It is a habit of many Tamil villagers to chew tobacco with betel leaf, lime and arecanut)

*Naramban* meant for chewing, and exported to Travancore, and White Burley, meant for the English Market.

After the tobacco-harvest, other crops are grown on the same land in a process called crop-rotation. Dry grains, manioc and other yams are cultivated. After harvesting *thanahal* and *kurakkan*, green gram is sowed. In December chillies are cultivated.

In another type of rotation, plantains are grown for two or three years before tobacco cultivation is resumed.

In a further type of rotation related to paddy land, chillies manioc and vegetables are cultivated after the harvest of rice. Besides the above mentioned crops, onions, betel vine, gourd, drumstick ( horse radish ) lady's finger, brinjal (egg plant) potato, pumpkin, turmeric, ginger, gram, millet and edible grains like beans are also grown.

The following is a list of important crops cultivated in the Peninsula:

*nellu* or rice; *varaku* or kada millet; *mondi* or Indian millet; *thinaichchamy* or German/Italian millet; *panichchamy* or common millet; *karuthachchamy* (a variety of millet); *putchamy* or *panicum colonum*; *kurakkan* or *eleusine coracana*; *payaru* or green gram; *uzhunthu* or black gram; *kollu* or red horse gram.<sup>3</sup>

Peasants of Jaffna, who have been known for qualities of thrift, prudence, patience and hard work, have wisely and carefully used the available land by the system of crop rotation and soil fertilization. One may mention three factors that prompted special forms of crop rotation:

- \* to make the the best use of the land of consisting of poor soil,
- \* to feed the big population of the Peninsula by cultivating food crops like paddy, dry grains and yams, and
- \* to enable the people of the Peninsula to survive financially by the cultivation of cash crops like tobacco and chillies.<sup>4</sup>

This is how a peasant of Jaffna makes use of every available inch of land: "Often on the borders of vegetable lots, or gardens of chillies, bean creepers are grown, providing a second crop. Where garden crops are fenced in, the fences are used as a trellis for snake gourds and other vegetables. Sometimes at the four corners of a small plot, a yard square containing a brinjal plant, one discovers four Indian corn plants and to these are trained bean creepers."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, a special feature of irrigation in Jaffna, which has today almost vanished with the introduction of modern machines, may be mentioned. Though the Peninsula is an arid region, abundance of underground water, which has been "the most important condition for human settlement in the Peninsula",<sup>6</sup> is fully utilized by digging wells. The presence of such wells is marked usually by tulip trees (*surya*) and a few coconut trees. water is drawn from the well by means of a device known as *thula* or well-sweep. It is a balanced lever.

“A palmyrah trunk is supported horizontally on supports with the thinner end of the trunk just over the well. To this end is fixed a pole or a rope that can be dropped into the well and at the end of pole is a bucket. Two men walk up and down the palmyrah trunk and as they walk towards the thinner end, their weight dips the pole and its bucket to the mouth of the well. As they walk towards the thinner end of the beam, they bring up the thinner end and with it comes the bucket filled with water. This is emptied by a third man into the field. Thus for hours two men run up and down the palmyrah beam working it in a see-saw manner while a third man lifts the bucket and empties it into the field where the little channels carry the water all over the garden”.<sup>7</sup>

So much for agriculture.

### Fishing

Fishing is the most important occupation that takes place along the coastal region of the Peninsula. De Queyroz, the Portuguese historian of Sri Lanka, observed that the Jaffna Peninsula “was for long years without cultivation... and though it abounded in groves of trees, its inhabitants lived more on fish and game than on the fruits of their labour”.<sup>8</sup>

The traditional navigational craft used before the arrival of plastic or motorised boats was *kaddumaram*, the anglicised form being catamaran. Meaning literally “tied logs”, it is made up of five logs; four are lashed together by ropes to the central one that extends from bow to stern. Logs are both light and durable. This raft is not only cheap but it also has the advantage of being unsinkable. Fitted with short mast and triangular sails, it is rowed out by hand paddles into the sea and after covering a short distance from the shore, sails are spread and the craft moves slowly with a light wind.<sup>9</sup>

In the sea, nets, having half to seven inches of interspaces, are set across the path where the fishes move. The lower edges of the nets are weighted with coral stones or iron rods so that the nets can sink deep in the water. The upper edge of the nets have wooden floats so that the position of the nets may be observed. Even as the nets drift along with the current, so too will *kaddumaram* adjust its position. Fishes, moving

usually in groups, come against the net, and put their heads through the mesh. The mesh gets entangled between the bodies of the fishes and the expanded gills of their head.<sup>10</sup>

### Deep-Sea Fishing

Fishing that takes place in Jaffna may be broadly divided into two categories: deep-sea fishing and coastal fishing.<sup>11</sup>

In deep-sea fishing, fishermen take their boats anywhere between two to fifteen miles from the shore and cast their nets in deep water. The following may be mentioned as pertaining to this category:

#### Valichal

Nets used in this type of fishing are supposed to “scrape together the catch” (and hence the name *valichal*). Fishermen, usually two or three, take their boat in the evening to about two to eight miles away from the shore and cast the nets in an area where the “current” is visible. Nets, on the upper side of which floats are tied every nine feet and on the lower side of which heavy coral stones are tied, move along with the current, but return to the original spot at the expected time. Fishermen remain in the boat till dawn or early morning, collect the catch and are ashore around seven in the morning.

#### Vellaivalai

The name *vellai* comes from the white colour of the nets used in this type of fishing. Fishermen go out to the sea in the evening taking with them nets which have a length of 500 to 1000 meters. After casting the nets in deep waters, they return to the shore. The nets remain on the same spot till the following morning.

#### Nylonvalai

In this type of fishing, the most modern multi-purpose nets are used to catch various kinds of fish. Usually these nets consist of three pieces placed one upon the other. The first and the third pieces are nearly four times thicker and stronger than the middle one which hangs rather loosely.



## Coastal Fishing

### Karaivalai

The term means nets for fishing on the shore (*karai*). Nets, and ropes called *kampaham* used in this type of fishing are very long. Early in the morning, a group of fishermen ( about seven ) would set out and sail in a boat carrying the nets and the ropes. As they move into water with a depth of about 60 to 90 feet, they start casting the nets. About 20 or more fishermen are on shore waiting for the boat to take an L turn, and then start pulling the ropes together with the nets to the shore. The boat comes to the shore drawing along the nets with fish. This operation might continue five or six times till late in the afternoon. This type of fishing might also be undertaken by fewer fishermen, in which case a *kaddumaram* will be used.

Usually fishermen know the type of fish they will catch in a certain month (e.g. sprats are caught in September) and also at different times of the day (e.g. a type of sardine fish caught between eleven and twelve in the morning). Because they are experts in knowing the nature of the current, fishermen spread the nets in the right place accordingly.

### Kalankandi

*Kalam* means shallow or not-deep and *kandy* ( from *kaddu* ) means to tie. Fishermen plant poles measuring 10 to 15 feet in a square or circular form in an area near the shore where it is not deep and “fence” or “tie” the area with nets. They go to the spot daily to collect the catch. Fishes, however, are caught neither shortly before nor shortly after the full moon. Nets have to be removed every fortnight and dyed.

### Cirakuvalai

It is very much like *kalankandi*. Prawns are caught.

### Paychuvilai

It means nets like wings. Some hold the nets in a semi-circle while others in two boats “chase” or drive the fishes to the semi-circle. People in the boats use leaves tied to ropes and the two boats function in the manner of two wings.

### Thoondilvalai

It means hook-net. Nets used in this type of fishing are long and each is attached with 500 to 5000 fishing hooks. They are cast at least about a mile from the shore.

### Nanduvalai

Nets of 500 metre length are cast in the sea in such a manner that they reach the bottom and remain on the sea-bed that is studded with crystal rocks. As the name *nandu* implies, crabs of a variety called lobster are, as a rule, caught.

### Cankuvalai

The name comes from the use of *canku* or conch-shells. Nets attached with at least 500 conch-shells are cast in muddy areas. These nets are meant to catch cuttle fish.

### Muralvalai

Nets used in this type of fishing, whose length vary from 500 to 3000 meters, are meant to catch fish known in Tamil as *mural*. Unlike many other nets, these float on water. *Muralvalai* fishing takes place in the months of February-March, namely during the dew season.

### Veechuvalai

This is shallow water fishing by a single fisherman. In knee-deep water, he watches for signs of fish and casts his net which spreads out like a parachute upside down.

### Koodu

Baskets for catching fish are let to float on the sea. These contrivances are usually made of stems from small palm-leaves called *eenchu* or of cane or even of iron. *Oddi* and *ora* fish are caught in this way.

Jaffna Peninsula has always been famous for fresh and tasty fishes. It exports iced-fish and dry-fish to Colombo. Among the many types of fish caught in Jaffna, the following may be mentioned: snapper, king fish, thorn back, crab, prawn, sea leach, lobster, cockle, shark, cuttle fish, trigger fish, sprats, skate, cell fish, blue fish, turtle, beche-du-mere or sea cucumber.<sup>12</sup>

## Other Occupations

### Toddy Tapping

In a land where there is an abundance of palmyrahs and coconut trees, it is understandable that toddy tapping is of considerable importance to many families. It is a hard job because the tapper, with a small casket containing a few sharp knives and certain other utensils hung on the waist, climbs to the top of the long palmyrah or coconut tree with both hands using his two feet tied loosely as footholds on the tree. He places earthenware pots strategically around the sheaths of young fruits after having made incisions on the latter. He climbs the tree twice a day.

### Cattle Raising

This has been an occupation of people in certain areas from ancient times. Though the island of Delft became famous for its ponies, it was called the "isle of cows" by the Portuguese. In the same manner, sheep and goats were raised in other islands.

## Foot Notes

1. **Hand book of Commercial General Information for Ceylon.**  
Compiled by L.J.B. Turner, M.A., Colombo 1922, p. 71. Henceforth this will be cited as **Handbook**.
2. **The Ceylon Manual 1912-1913**, pp. 298-299
3. De Silva, S.F., **op.cit.**, p. 255
4. **ibid.**
5. **ibid.**, p. 247
6. **ibid.**, p. 251
7. De Queyroz, **op.cit.**, p. 48
8. See Raghavan, M.D., **The Karava of Ceylon Society and Culture**, Colombo 1961, pp. 116-117

9. **Ibid.**

10. Information on this subject was gathered from .

A. Rasanayagam, A. Thiraviyam, A. Jeyaseelan (Thavam) and  
R. Francis Salesiar, of Toronto, Canada.

11. See **Handbook**, p.90 Tamil names of some fishes  
caught in the lagoon and in the deep-seas surrounding  
the Peninsula are: *valai, kumpula, tulluvandi, kili,*  
*kalavai, parai, kuruvili, kadalmari, kadda, soorai, kirai,*  
*kathalai, thirali, kayal, sunkan, paravai, terai, munalai, nunavi.*

Two other matters need to be mentioned in connection with fishing.

\* Chank fishing took place off the islands in earlier times and most of the  
divers came from India. (A cheap kind of bangles is made out of chank shells).  
See **Hand book**, p. 90

\* Muslims of Jaffna, unlike their counterparts in Batticaloa, are engaged “  
almost only in business and petty trading”. **The Ceylon Manual 1912-1913**,  
p. 302

12. Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, p. 204

## SOCIETY

The dominant institution of the societal organization of the people of Jaffna has been, and to a limited extent still is, the system of caste. Even though the caste system in Jaffna exhibits some common features with caste structures of both the Sri Lankan Sinhalese and South Indian Tamils, it has many characteristic features of its own. The Vellalars, namely the agriculturalists, who stood at the apex of the social structure of Jaffna, constituted the "key caste".<sup>1</sup> They were the *nainars* or feudal lords who had vassals called *kudimai* and slaves called *adimai*. Their chieftains bore the title *mudali*. The *kudimai* castes, consisting of artisan (e.g. gold smiths) and other professional (e.g. masons and barbers) castes could not be bought or sold but had to render their social and ritual duty at the behest of particular Vellala masters whose vassals they were. Those who belonged to these castes were called *kudimakkal*, namely "children of the house" implying thereby the close and intimate association with the Vellala family which was naturally dependent on them for their services. The *adimai* castes consisting of the Pallars who were agrarian labourers, Nalavars who were toddy tappers, Koviyaars who were household servants to Vellalars (and Chandars - tree climbers -) were labourers and domestic servants owned by the Vellalars. They lived apart from their masters usually in palmyrah groves where they could do gardening on their own for their maintenance.

There is evidence to show that the Vellalars played an important role in the administration of the Tamil Kings of Jaffna.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing very well that -the powerful Vellala *Mudaliyars*, *Adigars* and *Vidans* could become focal points of disaffection and revolt, the Portuguese did not abolish their roles entirely.<sup>3</sup>

Under the Dutch, the position of Vellalars became strengthened by the legal status of "slaves" conferred on the Untouchable castes, and the rights in land that these "slaves" traditionally held were done away with. Besides, thousands of slaves were imported from South India making the landless Untouchables increase in number.

According to Philippus Baldeus, a seventeenth century Dutch missionary and historian who described the various occupations of the castes in Jaffna, Vellalars were rich cultivators who possessed fields, cattle and servants. They looked down with utmost contempt upon the Untouchables who tilled the fields, watered plants and performed the most disagreeable labour, and demanded from them that they show extraordinary respect for their "lords". According to the same authority, Vellalars respected the Brahmins who were sober, intelligent, clean, friendly and vegetarian.

Thomas Van Rhee, a Dutch governor (1697) lists forty-one castes in Jaffna.

The British abolished all forms of slavery in 1844. This meant that the slave-castes were free person before the law. But age-old habits and customs, deeply entrenched as they are in the hearts and minds of a tradition-oriented people, die hard. Casie Chetty, the author of **The Castes, Customs and Manners of the Tamils**, divides the castes into two sections and arranges thirty-two castes hierarchically.<sup>5</sup>

Vellalars captialised on the educational, economic and political resources created by the British colonial rulers and invested their newly acquired riches both in land and in pompous domestic ceremonies to underline their prestigious identity. The artisan castes profited, too, by seeking occupation in towns and rural market places establishing thereby their independence from the Vellalars.

Although the concept of *adimai-kudimai* disappeared,<sup>6</sup> the notion that the Untouchables were unclean was not eradicated. In addition, the former "vassals" and "slaves" did not have the means to purchase their own land because the latter was sold at exorbitant prices.

In 1957 A Prevention of Social Disabilities Act was passed by the Sri Lankan Parliament, followed by an amendment to the Act in 1971. However, the caste-system persisted till the appearance in full strength of the "Tamil Liberation Struggle".

Vellalars constitute about 50% of the total population of the Jaffna Peninsula and the Untouchables about 20%. The Vellala caste "has a very strong sense of its own unique nature. It considers itself the guardian of Tamil orthodoxy... The ideology of purity and hierarchy which is at the root of the caste system greatly influences the behaviour of this social group. They provide one of the most perfect examples of what M. N. Srinivas calls Sanskritisation (the adoption of Brahmin values by a caste situated below them in the caste system) and dominate a great mass of 25 - 30 percent untouchables in its service".<sup>7</sup>

The Vellalars were able to assert their dominance and continue their leadership into recent times partly due to their numerical preponderance and partly due to sanction conferred on their status by the Hindu religion.

Vellalars are temple patrons who provide money for the construction and other expenses of temples and for the maintenance of Brahmins. Brahmins, who have the duty of performing rituals in temples and houses, constitute about 0.7% of the population of Jaffna and are "more or less in the employ of the Vellalas, officiating in temples owned and managed by them".<sup>8</sup> They live mostly at Maviddapuram, Keerimalai, Karainagar, Karanavai and Kokkuvil.

The primacy and the high rank given to the Vellala temple owners is demonstrated when the priest hands over to the owner *prasatam* or consecrated offerings after the *puja* to distribute to the worshippers who receive the offerings into their palms.<sup>9</sup>

Sacred power is believed to be conferred on the owner which “ensures the health and increase (*palan*) of the patron’s enterprises, his rice crop, his children and his livestock”.<sup>10</sup> This may be, as some suggest, a reflection of the ancient Vedic belief that the “person on whose behalf Brahmins perform sacrifices emerges from the rites possessing vitality ; he possesses what the gods possess ( *sri*, viz., fortune, welfare, fertility, progeny, rainfall and the increase of everything)”.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the agriculturist Vellalars “ win from their investment in ritual a culturally recognised right or entitlement to control agrarian reproduction ”<sup>12</sup> and bestowed authority to bring generative prosperity to a realm of earth.

An aspect of the religious sanction underlying the caste system is the notion of *tudakku* or impurity attributed to the Untouchables. There are five kinds of *tudakku* or *teeddu*, the first of four belonging to a class called organic impurity and the last one to inherent impurity. These are related to :

- ▶ birth
- ▶ death
- ▶ menarche (*camarttiya*)
- ▶ menses, and
- ▶ caste (*sati*).

Unlike the organic impurity which is temporary and which pertains to an individual, caste impurity is “common to a particular caste group”.<sup>13</sup> Though all castes are impure, “the low casts are those which are heavily polluted” and the Vellalars who need the services of the Untouchables “ leave these low castes to deal with the pollution generated by a member of the Vellalar caste”.<sup>14</sup>

Mention may be made here of fishers called Karaiyars who form the third largest caste group in Jaffna and who constitute circa 10% of its population. They were perhaps the older inhabitants of the Peninsula and, according to scholars, stand outside the *adimai- kudimai* social system of Jaffna.<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, a few observations may be made and questions raised to elucidate certain aspects of the topic under discussion.



Firstly, the thesis that the social structure of Jaffna based on the statuses of Vellalars and Untouchables is a combination of the “Gangetic ranking ideology of purity and impurity” and “an unspoken southern ranking ideology” is worthy of careful consideration. According to it, while the Vellalars receive their “potency” as masters of reproduction and custodians of growth from rituals, the Untouchables, who are barred from participating and benefitting from the rituals of their masters do, receive, however, “their potency - a dark, dangerous power arising from disorder - from the same rituals” ; these latter are required in “their various ritual capacities, to imbibe or manipulate the very substance of the autochthones, evil powers which are thought to afflict the world” resulting in the negation of fertility, good fortune and health” and justifying the “disabilities of the untouchable status”.<sup>16</sup> The question, then, may be raised whether this system’s “essential principles the southern ideology, and the ritual design that issues from it, are indeed quintessentially Tamil achievements, revealing to us an ancient and characteristically Tamil world view” ?<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, *Tesavalamai* which reflects the special features of the people and their milieu is said to be “Vellala-based”.<sup>18</sup> Even the Brahmin, who occupies a position of ritual superiority, is subordinate to the social power and the authority of the Vellalars.

Thirdly, liberalization and modernisation under the British benefitted mostly the upper caste Hindus. Indeed, “education and employment opportunities at the start went hand in hand with the caste system, except small pockets like Manipay, where the missionary impact was rather high”.<sup>19</sup> Even the economic affluence resulting from new employment opportunities offered in the Federated Malay States which lead to the building of new schools and temples preserved and consolidated the dominant position of the Vellalars. In this context, it is easy to understand that in politics, the needs and demands expressed by the “representatives” of the Tamils were those of the Vellala community without whose active cooperation, as Jane Russell rightly points out covering the period from 1933 to 1947, no effective social transformation proved possible.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion, it may be placed on record that a formidable and intransigent system which has been a “form of social control exercised by the highest group”<sup>21</sup> in Jaffna has begun a process of transformation with the birth of “Tamil Liberation Struggle” and the wave of immigration to Europe and America.

## Foot Notes

1. Arasaratnam, S., **op.cit.**, p.110
2. Pfaffenberger, Bryan, **The Religious Foundation of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka**, New York 1982, p. 35. According to Arasaratnam, the Tamil Kingdom was "based" on them. **Op.cit.**, p. 110.
3. See Abeyasinghe, T., **op.cit.**, pp. 24 -25
4. Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, p. 45
5. See Perinpanayagam, R.S., **The Karmic Theatre. Self, Society, and Astrology in Jaffna**, Amherst 1982, p. 23
6. The earlier "vassals" and "slaves" were later classed under the label *kudimakkal*. See Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, p. 45. See also Pathmanathan, S., "The Hindu Society in Sri Lanka : Changed and Changing" in **Religiousness in Sri Lanka**, Carter, John Ross (editor) Colombo 1979, pp. 155-156
7. Meyer, E., "Seeking the roots of the Tragedy" in Manor, James (edi tor), **Sri Lanka in Change and Crisis**, London 1984, p. 147
8. Arasaratnam, S., **op.cit.**, p. 110; see Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 208
9. Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, pp. 62-63
10. **Ibid.**, p. 66
11. **Ibid.**, p. 69
12. **Ibid.**, p. 57
13. Sekine Y., **Birth and Death Ceremonies Among the Jaffna Tamils**. A study of pollution from the viewpoint of spatial structure, in *Kikan Jinruigaku* Vol. 14. No. 4 (1983) p. 29
14. **Ibid.**
15. **Ibid.**; Arasaratnam, S., **op.cit.**, p. 111; Meyer, Elisabeth & Eric, **Sri Lanka. Ceylan et ses Populations**, Bruxelles 1979, p.82 **op.cit.**, p. 82. Karaiyars "had their own kinglet" during the times of the Kingdom of Jaffna. See Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 208
16. Pfaffenberger., B., **op.cit.** , pp. 58-59
17. A thesis held by Pfaffenberger. **Ibid.**, p. 51
18. Sivathamby, K., "Some aspects of the Social Composition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka", in **Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka**, p. 190
19. **Ibid.**, p. 195. The Roman Catholic Church which condemned the rigours of the system and its religious rationale, accepted it as an element pertaining to the social order. Today the Church does not view this matter in such a light.
20. **Ibid.** , p. 191
21. **Ibid.**

## RELIGIONS

A form of Hinduism has been the religion of the Tamils of Sri Lanka from time immemorial. There is evidence to show that people in the Island worshipped Siva and his symbol, *lingam*, before the advent of Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> In Jaffna, people's earliest religious practices seem to have included, among others, burying the dead with food and other offerings, and the use ( and worship ) of *trisula*, a symbol which stood for God and King. Worship of mother goddesses and of a guardian god of the villages called Aiyandar, and the Yaksha cult were also prevalent in Jaffna.<sup>2</sup>

Many people in Sri Lanka were converted to Buddhism in the third century B.C. Jaffna, too, came under its influence and the new religion seemed to have been patronised mainly by the ruling and upper classes.<sup>3</sup> However, the majority of the people of Jaffna remained faithful to the religion of their forefathers, namely Hinduism. In course of time, the revival of Saivism in South India through the *bhakti* movement may have facilitated the decline of Jaffna Buddhism. Whatever the case, either in the Pallava or the Chola period, Jaffna came under the sway of Classical Tamil Saivism.

The most ancient temples of Jaffna were those that were dedicated to Siva and his younger son Murugan.<sup>3</sup> During the eighth century A. D., temples dedicated to Ganesa, known more popularly as Pillaiyar, the eldest son of Siva and the god of success and worldly wisdom, arose. In

Jaffna, Pillaiyar was regarded as the “guardian of the crops” and many shrines were erected by the agriculturists in the neighbourhood of their fields.<sup>4</sup> According to a local tradition, a temple dedicated to Ganesa was erected at Inuvil, in Jaffna, by Karunakara Tondaiman, the commander of Kulottunga Chola I (1070-1118 A.D.), and it has come to be known as Karunakara Pillaiyar Temple.<sup>5</sup>

During the reign of the Hindu dynasty of the Arya Cakravartis who were conscious of their duties as patrons and promoters of Hinduism, “Hinduism was raised to the position of the official religion in a part of the Island [ Kingdom of Jaffna ] and thereafter enjoyed all the prerequisites of establishment”.<sup>6</sup>

Worship of Murugan also became popular in the Middle Ages. The Kandaswamy Temple at Nallur enjoyed the status of the Royal temple<sup>7</sup> and the Murugan Temple at Maviddapuram became a religious centre of attraction.<sup>8</sup>

The advent of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century meant, as far as Jaffna was concerned, the fruitful introduction of Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and the wanton destruction of many Hindu temples on the other hand. At the end of the Portuguese rule, almost the entire Peninsula was said to have been converted to Catholicism. But in reality, many Tamils remained Hindus at heart and professed Catholicism only with their lips. While the nominal Catholics reverted to their former religion under the Dutch rule, Catholics who remained loyal to their faith under Dutch persecution, had to wait many years to gain religious freedom under the British.

In the middle of the last century, Arumuga Navalar rejuvenated the ancient faith by becoming an ardent defender of pure Saivism and an untiring critic of the abuse of religious observances. He wrote learnedly and authoritatively on Saiva Siddhanta. In point of fact, Hindus of Jaffna are for the most part adherents of Saiva Siddhanta, the “religion of the Tamil people, by the side of which every other form is of foreign origin”.<sup>9</sup> This form of Saivism, based mainly on the Saiva Agamas ( non-vedic sacred traditions ), numbering twenty eight (and many upagamas), the inspired writings of saints and mystics called **Panniru Tirumurai**

( the twelve sacred books ), was formulated logically in fourteen canonical works called **Meykanda Sastras** by philosopher-sages who lived in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The founder of this Philosophical system was Meykanda Devar, the composer of the basic text called **Sivagnana Bodham**. His disciple Arundai wrote a commentary on it called **Sivagnana Siddhiyar**.

According to Saiva Siddhanta, the Absolute Being termed *pati* ( Lord ) is one, supreme, perfect, intelligent and endowed with creative energy. He is the ground of all being and is called Siva. Other beings, termed *pasu* ( souls ) and *pasa* ( bond ) are absolutely dependent on Siva. Unlike the Vedanta, the Saiva Siddhanta underlines the irreconcilable difference between God and souls. Even in the highest state of union with the Supreme Being, the soul never becomes identified with it but remains forever a dependent being.

In this system of religious philosophy, four stages in the life of a devotee are pointed out as paths to perfection: *carya* or physical works, *kriya* or prayer, *yoga* or meditation and *gnana* or divine knowledge.

Basic to this system is the emphasis on God's love which goes out of its way to save souls from the three "bonds" of matter ( *maya* ), deeds ( *karma* ) and ignorance ( *anava* ) and to grant souls immortal bliss, and the loving devotion called *bhakti* on the part of the soul which is the key to arriving at union with God.

It is doubtful whether the many Saivites of Jaffna are aware of this rich religious heritage. In practice, however, a popular form of Saivism prevails in Jaffna. This may be considered on two levels: on the external -almost primitive- level and on the level of deep religiosity.<sup>10</sup>

On the first level, worship of trees, animals and serpents, a remnant of the ancient folk religion, is still observable in some Hindu villages.

On certain days, people gather under a tree, decorate and garland it, offer milk rice and other delicacies.

When people go through a jungle where elephants roam about, they install an idol of Ganesa under a tree, offer flowers, break coconut, light camphor and pray that no harm befalls them.

The day after the feast of *Thai Ponkal*, cows and bulls are washed and garlanded, and their foreheads are smeared with sacred ash, sandal paste and red paste called *kunkumam*; after a *puja*, camphor is lighted and the cows and bulls are fed with milk-rice and other eatables.

The worship of cobra, which is related to Siva and his consort Sakti, according to some, is an ancient custom of the Dravidians. The king-cobra is considered divine and is never killed. There are many temples, big and small, dedicated to Naga, the cobra, where festivals are held on a grand scale. Cobras are allowed and encouraged to stay unmolested in certain spots of the temple premises and cups of milk are offered to them by both priests and devotees. It is claimed that no one has died of snake bite in a certain village where there is a Naga temple. If someone is bitten by a snake, he goes to the temple and drinks a little water taken from the sacred tank, mixing it with a lump of earth culled from an ant-hill. He remains a few days in the temple till he is cured.

Mother goddess is worshiped in the form of Kali or Durga.. At times she is considered the guardian goddess of the house. It is interesting to note that some temples dedicated to Kali are officiated by Brahmins whereas others are officiated by *pusaris* or non-Brahmin village priests according to the old Tamil custom. During *puja*, some devotees get into a trance. *Kavadi* or dance procession on a hook after piercing one's body with needles, and *karakam*, namely the carrying of a copper pot filled with water and covered with margosa leaves in a state of frenzy, are also devotional practices associated with the worship of Kali.

On the second level, there are practices that connote the deep religiousness of people in the villages. People often say under their breath "*ellam nee than*" ( you are everything ) and often use the wise saying "*avaninri anuvum asaiyatu*" ( without his knowledge, not even an atom will move ).

In order to obtain a favour, e.g. cure from disease, a devotee will go to the temple and observe a sit-in called *kovilil pazhi kidathal*. One could observe many such devotees in temples such as the one at Sellachannithi. When a devotee does not get what he wants, he blames God saying “*kuruddu theivam*” (blind God) or “*sekiddu Pillayar*” (deaf Pillaiyar). The note of familiarity which these practices point at is corroborated by the use of the terms *nee* (you), *appan* (father) and *amma* (mother) when addressing God.<sup>11</sup>

In houses of Saivites, there is usually a prayer room called *cuvami arai* with an image or picture of one or many deities. Before starting to worship, one has to purify one's body by bathing and by washing one's mouth. Holy ash called *viputi* is applied on one's forehead. One may either sit or stand while worshipping. A worshipper closes his eyes and holds his palms together. This worship takes place before breakfast and is normally repeated before dinner.

If the above may be called private worship, then a form of public worship takes place in the temple. Temples are dedicated to Siva, Murugan, Vairavar, Pillaiyar and Kali. When the bells of the temple toll, people invoke the name of the village deity.<sup>12</sup>

There are two types of temples: *agama kovils* or shrines built according to the Agamic rules and regulations where Brahmins perform Sanscritic rites, and non-*agama kovils* or shrines of Kali, Kannaki and Amman where non-Sanscritic rites are performed. Scholars point out that while the *agama* worship of Siva, Murugan, Pillaiyar and Parvati seeks to “enclose within a bounded, purified, and above all else, ordered space the devastating and amoral power of the autochthonous god” and emphasises dignity, the non-Sanscritic rite worship tends to be “expiatory” in the sense of emphasis is laid more on the violent and bloody sacrifice than on “order and purity”.<sup>13</sup>

These two types may also be called temples of “great tradition” and of “little tradition”. The first consists of “Sanskritised ritual and liturgical practices pertaining to the theology of Saivism” and the second consists in the worship of, and rituals related to “mother-goddesses, fertility and therapeutic cults, animism” etc.<sup>14</sup>

There is a Kannaki Amman Temple at Navali where an anklet, the symbol of the goddess, and a lance, the symbol of Murugan are displayed. There are daily *pujas* by a *pusari* who chants no verses, recites no *mantras* but performs a silent service with a lamp.<sup>15</sup>

In Jaffna, only a few temples are dedicated to Vishnu and Krishna and there is only one temple to Brahma. Vairavan ( Bhairava ) and Virabhadra, the first an aspect of Siva and the second a manifestation of Siva's anger, are also worshiped.<sup>16</sup>

Periyatampiran, Nagatampiran, Kalakandan, Korrikilavan, Putavarayar, Muni, Madan, Annamar, Cevukar, Viranmar, Kattavarayar, Kotti, Nili, Valai, Peycci, Petti, Mari, Naccimar etc. are some of the deities of very ancient times worshipped even today.<sup>17</sup>

People maintain the temple by supplying flowers, milk, coconut, oil, rice, bells, lamps etc. for the *puja*. Before entering the temple, feet, hands and mouth have to be washed and all footwear and upper garment of men to be removed. Once inside, hands are raised onto head, imploring thereby the saving grace of God. *Puja* or flower offering is held at dawn, noon and dusk. Invocations are chanted ( in Sanskrit ). Lights, camphor and flowers are used. Boiled rice , fruit, honey, and milk are offered. During the *puja*, sound of drums, conch, bells, *nataswaram* mingled with the cry of *arohara* "elevate the spirit of a person at least for a moment" and the "feeling of self is brought low".<sup>18</sup>

After the *puja*, *prasatam* ( consecrated offerings ) consisting normally of *viputi* or sacred ash, *cantanam* or sandalwood paste, *pu* or flowers and *kunkumam* or vermilion powder paste is distributed. *Ponkal* or *motakam*, namely sweet meats, are also offered.

One can also observe devotees moving round the temple rolling their body on the ground. During festival times, *kavadi* dance and *pata yathirai* or pilgrimage on foot take place from temple to temple.

*Kathappirasangam*, a form of "monotheatre" in which a myth is narrated by a talented story teller, often enacting it and singing parts of it accompanied by a hand-held cymbal, is a popular form of preaching on



auspicious days. This form of imparting religious instruction, popular during the Saiva revival of the nineteenth century, is called *purana padanam*. It is claimed that *kathappirasangam* was the vehicle which was used to convey to Saivites a basic conviction of the religious tradition, namely the “karmic theory as structure of cause and effect, which effect becomes a cause once again in cycle of transformation”.<sup>19</sup>

Taking of vows, fasting, abstinence from meat, fish and egg on Fridays and on festival days are observed.

The Saivites of Jaffna love to sing the sacred hymns **Tevaram** and **Tiruvacakam**. There is a class of people called *pandarams* who are experts in singing these hymns.

The following two observations may throw light on two aspects of Saiva way of life as found in Jaffna:

Brahmins in Jaffna do not enjoy the same status as they do in India. They officiate as priests in most Saiva temples and conduct ceremonies at home. They are the “paid servants” of the temple owners. This is due to the fact that the Jaffna Hindus are Saiva Siddhantins. In this religious tradition, the place of honour goes to non-Brahmin priests called *Saiva -Kurukkal*. During the reign of the Tamil Kings, these priests came and settled down at Varany, Navali, Chulipuram and Vannarpannai.<sup>20</sup>

There is no rivalry and animosity between Saivites and Vaishnavites. In fact, “the worship of Vishnu is complimentary to Saivism” The Saivites venerate both Cidamparam, Siva’s earthly abode, and Srirangam and Tiruppati, where Vishnu is worshipped.<sup>21</sup>

This essay will be incomplete without reference to Christians and Muslims in Jaffna.

Though the Tamils of Jaffna are overwhelmingly Saivites, there is a strong presence of Christians among them. Nearly ten percent of the population is Christian and among the Christians there are roughly eighty percent or more Roman Catholics.

As mentioned earlier, Catholicism was introduced into Jaffna by the Portuguese. Catholic missionaries built not only churches and convents but also schools and charitable institutions. The Tamil Catholics who were genuine in their conversion proved the strength of their religious conviction by their admirable perseverance under the harsh persecution unleashed by the Dutch Calvinists. They had to wait till 1839 when Britain officially granted them freedom of religious worship.

The second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the phenomenal revival of Catholicism. Under leaders like Orazio Bettacchini and Christopher Bonjean, it was able to establish itself firmly in the field of education. Sainly men like Semeria excelled not only in religious leadership, but also in social involvement. Catholic priests were in the forefront to help and bury the victims of cholera which plagued the Peninsula many times in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The first quarter of the twentieth century was marked by a wave of conversions and controversy spearheaded by Swami Gnana Prakasar of Nallur. Aggressive as a missionary, he was an excellent scholar and he established vital contacts between the Church and the world of Tamil scholars. This aspect paved the way for later scholars like Thaveethu Adikal and Thaninayagam Adikal to make their marks in the field of Tamil research.

In the nineteen sixties, the Vatican Council introduced a fresh air of openness, cooperation and dialogue with other religions. It took some time for the official Church in Jaffna to absorb and respond to this novel approach. But it has got over its initial hesitation and is now deeply engaged in dialogue with Saivites. In fact, the Catholic Church of Jaffna today is a well organised and respected institution that has impressed the Jaffna population by its exemplary social involvement and help for the oppressed.

The Protestants of Jaffna belonging to denominations such as the Church of England, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, among others, contributed to the development of Tamil society in Jaffna in three interrelated ways:

Providing education  
Fighting against caste system  
Raising the standard of women.

Education was the springboard that provided an opportunity for the Protestant Churches to Proselytise on the one hand, and for Hindus to get Western education on the other hand.

The Protestant Seminary at Vaddukkoddai was an institution on a par with any of its kind in the Island.

It is also on record that able men like Christian David of Jaffna and Charles Sinnatamby of Point Pedro were ardent workers for the social amelioration of the low caste converts.<sup>22</sup>

By opening schools and college for girls, opportunities were offered to females to get educated and become leaders.

It is no wonder that many eminent clerical servants, professionals, teachers and scholars were products of Protestant schools. It is not to be forgotten that S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the "Father of the Tamil Nation", was a practising Christian of eminence.

Finally, a word about Muslims in Jaffna. According to statistics, among the population of the Jaffna district, 1.2% were Muslims in 1946 and 1.66% in 1981.<sup>23</sup>

These Muslims are descendants of Arab traders who had married Tamil women. Though they speak Tamil and use many Tamil customs and habits, they, in the words of a scholar, "have been keen to disown their Tamil heritage and establish their separate identity".<sup>24</sup>

One interesting feature regarding the Jaffna Muslims is that 90% of tailors of Jaffna town are Muslims, "a phenomenon not found anywhere else in Sri Lanka".<sup>25</sup>

## Foot Notes

1. See Sathasivam, A., "The Hindu Religious Heritage in Sri Lanka: Revived and Remembered" in **Religiousness in Sri Lanka**, Carter, John Ross ( editor ), pp. 162 -163; Cartman, James, **op.cit.**, pp. 9 - 10
2. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p 216
3. **Ibid.**
4. Pillay, K.K., **op.cit.**, pp. 152-153
5. Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p 217
6. Arasaratnam, A., **op.cit.**, p. 113
7. **Ibid.**
8. Sathasivam, A., **op.cit.**, p . 164
9. Rev. Goudie cited **Ibid.**, p. 167. "Almost all Hindus in Jaffna are Saivites". Pathmathan, S., " The Hindu Society in Sri Lanka: Changed and Changing" in **Religiousness in Sri Lanka**, Carter John Ross (editor),p. 150
10. See Kanapathipillai, K., "Popular Religion among the Ceylon Tamils" in **Tamil Culture**, Vol. VIII, No.1. (1959), pp. 26-31
11. Suseenthirarajh, S., "Religiousnes in the Saiva Village" in **Religiousness in Sri Lanka**, Carter, John Ross (editor ), pp. 179 -181
12. **Ibid.**, p. 183
13. Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, p. 159
14. Perinpanayagam, R.S., **op.cit.**, p. 38
15. **Ibid.**, p. 43
16. **Ibid.**, p. 31
17. See Ragupathy, P., **op.cit.**, p. 216
18. Suseenthirarajah, S., **op.cit.** , p. 184; Perinpanayagam, R. S., **op.cit.**, p. 4. The most commonly used item for a usual ritual is *kumpam*. It is a brass vessel containing water, milk and a few coins; a coconut is placed on top of the pot and many mango leaves are arranged at the mouth of the pot in such a mannar that they stand upright.
19. Perinpanayagam, R.S., **op.cit.**, p. 64

20. Navaratnam, C. S., **op.cit.**, p. 197. Raghavan states that Jaffna fosters "a priesthood of its own whose visible form is the Saiva Kurukkal. Hindu children, at about ten years of age, undergo a rite in initiatio preparing them for their adult life. This ceremony corresponds to the Upanayanam of the Brahmin lad which marks the beginning of the Brahma-chariya Ashramam." He further affirms that the *Saiva urukkal* of Jaffna takes the place of the Brahmin priest. Raghavan, M.D., **Ceylon. A Pictorial Survey of the Peoples and Arts.**, p. 232
21. Suseenthirarajah, S., **op.cit.**, p. 175
22. Saveri, Nicholapillai Maria, **Catholic-Hindu Encounter. Relations between Roman Catholics and Hindus in Jaffna, Sri Lanka 1900 -1926**, Colombo 1994, p. 283
23. Vasundhara Mohan, R., **Muslims in Sri Lanka**, Jaipur 1985, pp. 11, 60
24. **Ibid.**, p. 27. This attitude, which is certainly debatable, is in sharp contrast to that of Muslims in Tamil Nadu. See also Marikar, A. I. L., Lafir, A. L. M., Macan Markar, A. H., **Glimpses from the Past of the Moors of Sri Lanka**, Colombo 1976.
25. Vasundhara Mohan . R., **op.cit.**, pp. 39 -40

## FESTIVALS

In a society in which all spheres of life are stamped by a deep sense of religiosity, it is to be expected that the dividing line between religious and secular festivals remains blurred. Since most of the Tamils of Jaffna are Hindus, their festivals have been interpreted in the light of Hindu myths and traditions. In addition, at least some of their festivals are nature-related. The “natural phenomena of New Moon, the entering of the sun into each sign of the Zodiac, the eclipses, the equinoxes, the solstices were all considered ‘Punnyakalams’ (Holy times). The national festivals were so fixed as to coincide with the natural phenomena”.<sup>1</sup>

The New Year begins on the day the sun is said to enter the Zodiacal house Aries<sup>2</sup> in the month of *Chithirai* ( April-May ) after the vernal nox. Since this feast is based on the solar calendar, the date never changes.

On the previous day, the house and compound are cleaned and ceremonially sprinkled with water mixed with cowdung ( or with saffron). Pots and pans are polished and incense is burned. People get up early and as the first thing are expected to set their eyes on auspicious objects. All wear new clothes. Men wear white *veddīs* and shawls and women wear sarees in colours as prescribed in the Hindu Almanac.

All members of the family visit the temple to worship and to offer gifts. The first fire is lit usually by the lady of the house facing the direction indicated by the astrologers. The first meal, customarily milk rice, is cooked and eaten at an auspicious time.

The ceremony of *kaivisesham* , namely the gift or exchange of coins wrapped in betel leaves, takes place after the meal, ordinarily between the head of the family and a visitor who has been invited to be present at the meal. It is believed that if the “giver” is a lucky person, the “ receiver” too will have luck with money right throughout the year.<sup>3</sup> *Kaivisesham* also takes place among family members, relations and friends.

The first bath takes place at an auspicious time after having applied oil and medicament prepared from certain leaves, flowers, saffron and milk. Visits to parents and relatives are made and the poor are fed and given alms.<sup>4</sup>

The full-moon day in *Chithirai* is called *Chithiraippaurnami* and is a special day of fast and penitence. It is believed that the observances on this day seek to propitiate Chandragupta, the record-keeper of Yama, the god of death,, who passes judgement on the future of a person on the basis of statistical record of good and bad deeds kept by Chandragupta.<sup>5</sup> This day is observed in remembrance of departed mothers.

On the darkest night of the month of *Adi* ( July - August ) called *Adi Amavasai* a fast is undertaken in remembrance of departed fathers. It is a day of worship and of abstinence from meat and fish.

The festival of *Vinayaga Sathurthi* occurs on the fortnight of *Avani* ( August - September ) and is sacred to Pillaiyar, the elder son of Siva and Parvathi. It is in remembrance of the day Parvati created him in order to guard her personal living quarters. It is observed by making clay figures of Pillaiyar and offering *pujas* “with 21 kinds of leaves, 21 kinds of flowers and 21 kinds of grass” which is considered sacred and used for Hindu rituals; *kolukkaddai*, which is some sort of cake made out of green gram, jaggery, coconut and flour is prepared and offered to him; coconuts are broken before the image and people knock their foreheads with the knuckles while they sit and stand alternately. The image of Pillaiyar is then taken to a tank and subsequently immersed.<sup>6</sup>

The feast of *Navarattiri*, namely “ nine nights”, which is special to women, falls in *Puraddasi* ( September - October ) and is celebrated

in honour of the three *saktis* or energies of God, personified as Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. Three nights are assigned to each goddess. It is terminated with *Saraswathipucai* and *Vijayadasami*, the tenth day after the full moon.

*Deepavali*, meaning literally "rows of lamps", is the festival of lights and is celebrated to mark the triumph of Light or Good over darkness or evil. It falls on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight in *Aipasi* ( October - November). The day is marked by a ritual bath at sunrise, which is equivalent to bathing in the sacred river Ganges, offering sweet meats to deities, wearing new clothes, visiting friends, and at night lighting houses with rows of little oil lamps.

The festival of *Suran Por* falls twelve days after *Deepavali* - hence in the bright fortnight of *Aipasi* - and at the end of a six day fasting called *Kantha Shashti*, namely the sixth ( *shashti* ) day in honour of Murugan ( Skanda ). This festival is in remembrance of the titanic fight between Murugan, the son of Siva, and Suran, a devotee of Siva who possessed invincible weapons of war and the gift of immortality. Suran, who assumed many forms each time after getting beheaded, was finally conquered and exterminated by Murugan. The two forms Suran assumed, cock and peacock, were absorbed into Murugan's standard and vehicle respectively. The *Sooran Por* is dramatised when the statues are taken in procession from the temple by devotees. The latter shout *vel! vel! vel!* ( javelin! ) as the final head falls, and the statue of Murugan is carried back victoriously into the temple.

*Kartikai Vilakkidu* or lighting of lamps is another festival of lights celebrated on the full-moon day of *Kartikai* ( October - November). It is celebrated on the mythical level, in remembrance of Siva assuming the form of a burning mountain with no beginning and no end in order to settle a dispute as to who was superior between two of his subordinates, Brahma and Vishnu; and on the profane or secular level, this feast is said to have originated among the Tamils of South India as a celebration of lights related to the weather conditions of nature. November is a cold-month of dark clouds and incessant rains. Hence, people longing to experience the warmth of the sun expressed their desire by lighting lamps everywhere.<sup>7</sup>



*Tiruvempavai* is celebrated in *Markazhi* ( December-January ) lasting for twenty days, to honour the mystic and Saint Manikkavasagar, the author of the popular anthology of hymns called **Tiruvacakam**. Verses from this sacred work are recited in the temples during this period.

*Markazhippillaiyar* is a festival in honour of Pillaiyar celebrated in December-January. In the mornings, a figure or representation of this deity is fashioned out of cowdung, placed in the middle of an open space and worshipped. In the evenings, the figure is brought into the house and kept in a vessel. At the end of the festival, all the figures are burnt and the ashes are used as *viputi* by the members of the family.<sup>8</sup>

*Thai Ponkal* festival falls in the beginning of *Thai* ( January-February ). The dawn of *Thai* bids farewell to the “unlucky” month of *Markazhi* and the season of rains. The sun starts its north-bound journey from the Tropic of Capricorn. House is repaired, new pots and pans are bought, new clothes, jewelleryes, grains and fruits are purchased.

The day prior to *Thai Ponkal* is called *Bhogi Ponkal* and is marked by huge fires made at dawn by young boys with sticks and straw. This is followed by the beating of tomtoms.<sup>9</sup>

On the day of *Thai Ponkal*, the place where newly harvested rice is to be cooked is washed with water mixed with cowdung and decorated with *kolam* which is a red and white pattern drawn out of powdered rice. Early morning, new rice is put in new earthen vessels placed on three round heaps of fire. There is a fourth hearth on which rice, milk, sugar, ghee and dhal are placed. The fire is kindled at an auspicious time and everyone gathers round the fire to see rice boil. “One bubble and then another rises to the top. Dead silence prevails... a terror of waiting thrills the assembly. Then with a heave, a hiss, and a surge of bubbles, the seething milk mounts to the top of the vessel. The milk overflowing then runs down the blackened sides of the vessel, and there is a joyous cry which fills the air: Pongal! Oh Pongal!! It boils! Oh! It boils!! The offering to the Sun.”<sup>10</sup> When the rice has boiled, the vessels are removed and a portion of the cooked rice called *pukkai* is offered to the sun on a plantain leaf. Afterwards the entire family and the visitors eat *ponkal*.

The following day is the festival of cattle. They are bathed, decorated, at times incensed, and are led into the streets accompanied by drums.

Some interesting features may be noted regarding the festival:

Firstly, some scholars maintain that this festival is “pre-aryan, dating back to a time when the Brahmanic priesthood was not so rigourously established”. In fact, the “house holder himself is his own priest” on *Thai Ponkal* day. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the presence of low caste people does not cause impurity in this ritual.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, this festival, which in its origin was a bound with agriculture, has become today a common festival of all classes of Tamils. Even the Christians have begun to celebrate it as Thanksgiving Festival.

Finally, though there is another *Ponkal* in July, *Thai Ponkal* remains festival par excellence<sup>12</sup>

*Maha Sivaratri*, meaning “great night of Siva”, is celebrated in *Masi* ( February - March ) on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight ( i.e the night previous to the new-moon day ). Devotees bathe in the morning and fast during the day. An all night vigil is observed. The night, divided into four *yamas* or quarters, is devoted to the devotional worship of Siva. Passages from **Sivapuranam** are read. A *puja* is held every two and a half hours. Siva is worshiped in the form of *linga* before which an offering of margosa leaves is placed. Devotees are not expected to sleep until dusk.<sup>13</sup>

Having so far considered some of the important festivals usually connected with Hinduism, we now wish to mention a few festivals of other major religions of the Peninsula.

Christmas has become a feast celebrated by almost all Tamils in Jaffna. Hindus celebrate it by organizing *oli vilas* or festivals of light. Everyone attempts to radiate a mood of peace and reconciliation on this day.

Christians have a midnight Mass and continue their festivities till the first week of January with Christmas Carols, Nativity plays and Christmas parties for children.

New year is celebrated by Christians on the first of January. Catholics go for midnight Mass, visit their relatives in the morning and exchange *kaivishesham*. In certain villages, New Year is celebrated on a larger scale than Christmas.

The season of Lent is a holy period for Christians. They start the season by attending Holy Mass on Ash Wednesday. A pious act of devotion called the Way of the Cross is made either in private or with the congregation every Friday. It has also become a custom to have lenten "Retreats" lasting for at least a week in each parish. In addition to singing the lamentation of the passion of Jesus called *pasam*, a Passion Play is also staged shortly before or on Palm Sunday to help the faithful meditate on the sufferings of Christ.

The Passion Plays staged by Tirumarai Kalamamram ( Centre for Performing Arts ) is a huge production on a multiple-stage and has usually a cast of not less than one hundred and the total number of artists and helpers amount to not less than two hundred and fifty. Spectators include a good number of Hindus. <sup>14</sup> Jaffna Catholicism is also known for its Eucharistic and Marian devotions and feasts.

The Muslims of Jaffna celebrate the following festivals on a grand scale:

- Id-UI-Fitr( Ramazan Festival ),
- Id-UI-Alha ( Hadji Festival), and
- Milad-Un-Nabi ( Holy Prophet's birthday )

## Foot Notes

1. Navaratnam, C.S., **op.cit.**, p. 199
2. Aries is called *medam* ( ram) in Tamil. The Sanskrit name for it is *aja.*, meaning that which is not born.
3. See Cartman, James, **op.cit.**, p. 107
4. The New Year Day is celebrated on a grander scale in Jaffna than in Tamil Nadu. Arasaratnam, S. A., **op.cit.** , p. 114
5. See Ratnam, S.A., **Tamil Festivals**, Singapore, p. 27
6. See **ibid.**, p. 40
8. See Cartman, James, **op.cit.**, p. 111. *Viputi* is the sared ash.
9. See **ibid.**
10. **ibid.**, p. 112
11. **ibid.**
12. **ibid.**, p. 113
13. Perinpanayagam, R. S., **op.cit.**, pp. 46 - 51
14. The Passion Play stayed by Tirumarai Kalamanram in Jaffna in 1995 was entitled *Palikkalam* and lasted for three and a half hours. It was held prior to and including Palm Sunday. There were between four to five thousand people at each performance. Because of the vast crowd, a second performance on the last day had to be held at midnight. The spectators were mostly Hindus.

## LIVING

A characteristic feature of Jaffna is the closed nature of the average dwelling. A thick fence of interlocked palmyrah or coconut leaves supported by tulip trees with thick foliage screens off the house from the outside world. The entrance to the compound is the gate set in the fence. It may be either simple or elaborate with a cadjan roof. In earlier times a hinged gate called *sankadappadalai* was set in the fence. A weight of stone or iron rod was attached to the gate and it helped the gate to close by itself after being opened.

Most houses have a long open gallery called veranda supported on pillars made of wood or stones. There is a well in the vicinity.

The “four-in-one” house called *nalupura* or *natcar* has become a rarity. It had an open central courtyard in rectangular shape with rooms on all sides and a well at the end of a long veranda. <sup>1</sup> At times, the well was situated right at the central courtyard.

Another feature has already been mentioned earlier. It is namely the “settled tendency” of the people of Jaffna to build their houses right along lanes, roads and railway tracks.<sup>2</sup>

People spend considerable time to prepare their meals. Rice, the staple food, is cooked in the following way: It is emptied into a pot of boiling water and allowed to get fully cooked. Care is taken to see that the water in the rice pot does not run dry. When the rice is well boiled, the pot of rice is taken out and the water is strained off to another Vessel. This soupy water called *kanci* is usually consumed before the rice meal.

Rice is eaten with meat, fish and vegetable curries, which are sauces with spices and strong condiments cooked with copious coconut milk and coconut oil. Coconut is scraped and ground together with chillies and other condiments over a rectangular grinding stone and the resulting pasty stuff is gathered in the form of a ball and then cooked with fish, meat or vegetable.

A special sauce prepared by grinding the white-meated kernel of the coconut and mixing it with chillies is called *pachadi*. It is also a favourite dish consumed with rice and a variety of *appams* or hoppers.

The way men and women dress themselves and wear ornaments exhibits particularities proper to Jaffna. The men wear a nine feet by 50 inches loin cloth called *veddi* - the lower garment. The wearer holds the two ends of the garment in front and pulls the right end to the left side of his waist and thrusts it firm: the left end of the cloth is then drawn to the right side and firmly tucked. It is worth mentioning that this differs sharply from the manner the Tamils of South India wear their garment. A shawl is worn over a shirt.

Earlier it was usual for men to brush up their hair in a knot behind the head called *kudumi*. This practice had gone out of fashion a few decades back. Earlier, it was also customary in villages to have the ears of male children bored so that they could wear a pair of ear-rings called *kadukkan*. This practice too has gone out of fashion.

Women wear the saree like their counterparts in South India. They also put on the round mark called *poddu* on the forehead. Flowers are worn on the back of the head only on special occasions. At home sarees are worn loosely draped, but they are colourfully worn with expensive ornaments for functions.

Social customs of the earlier times dictated that the women of lower classes wore sarees without any upper garment; the loose end of the saree was draped across the chest above the breasts. It was called *kurukku kaddu*, literally cross-wear.

An old and general usage was that the ear lobes of women were stretched to wear the ear jewelry called *todu*. This custom, too, has gone out of fashion.

The social life of the people of Jaffna was governed by a code of customary laws called Tesavalamai. The term means literally "traditions of the country". Tesavalamai, as we know it today, was codified by Clasz Isaaksz at the direction of the Dutch Governor Simons in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Accepted by the local leaders as "perfectly" in agreement with the usual customs prevailing in Jaffna, it was promulgated by the Dutch in 1707, and acknowledged and accepted as valid even by the British.

Tesavalamai embodies customs and practices developed under the Tamil rulers of the Kingdom of Jaffna and reflects the social history of the Tamils of that region. A special feature of this code was the fusion of two social systems: the matriarchal, a system prevailing in Kerala, and patriarchal, a system prevailing in the east coast of India, earlier known as Coromandel.

Tesavalamai, contains practices regarding marriage and inheritance and right of property or devolution of property through the female line. According to it, *sambandam* or marriage is forbidden between close relations except cross-cousins, namely children of a brother with children of a sister. Marriage may be conducted without a priest but the customary rites and ceremonies should be observed for it to be valid. The Hindu rite of *omam* ( fire ceremony ) may be dropped but the tying of a necklace called *tali* is essential to the validity of marriage. A wedding saree called *koorai* is also given to the bride. When a Hindu priest is present, he could either perform the *omam* ceremony or he may merely conduct a rite called Pillaiyar ceremony. If the parties are too poor to afford a ( gold ) necklace, just a piece of cord may be sufficient; if the parties cannot afford the services of a priest, Vannan (washerman) and Ampaddan (barber) in addition to their relations should be present.<sup>3</sup>

The property devolves on the females of a family from generation to generation. When a married woman dies intestate, her property goes to her children or the children of her sister. The husband may give the property of his wife to his children as dowry.<sup>4</sup> Tesavalamai not only "conserves the right of women" and allows them to have "separate property, a portion of the acquired property" but also prohibits husbands from disposing of their property.<sup>5</sup>

Among the many rites, ceremonies, customs and practices the Tamils of Jaffna cherish, one may mention those surrounding the three major events of puberty, marriage and death.

### Puberty or the coming of age

Attaining puberty is called *pooppeythal*, literally "flowering". The girl who has attained age is secluded from the rest of the family and is, as a rule, forbidden to see males. Among the Vellalars, a Kovia woman is designated to be the companion of the girl till the official ceremony takes place. Margosa leaves, which are believed to be very effective against evil, palm leaves and a knife called *sathakam* are placed in a secluded room. The washerman of the family is called to remove the soiled cloth, and a ceremonial cloth called *vannanmathu* is given by him. He continues to supply the girl with *vannanmathu* till the day of the official ritual. The girl bathes every five days helped by a girl cousin. On the final day of official and ritual celebration, the girl is taken to the well and is made to sit on old interlaced coconut leaves holding three betel leaves, three arecanuts and a coin in her hands. *Kumpam*, namely a pot of water with coconut on top and mango leaves placed on its mouth, some milk and a kind of grass called *aruku* are placed in a tray, and camphor is lighted. *Palaruku* is placed on the head of the girl by her relatives and the girl starts bathing. After the bath, the girl is conducted in procession to a clean room accompanied by music. In earlier times, the girl was made to walk on white clothes spread on the ground. She wears a saree for the first time, and adorned with ornaments, comes to take a place of prominence among the invited guests. *Arati*, the ceremony designed to dispel evil influences, takes place eleven times with lighted camphor and other articles such as flowers, fruits, curd, cakes, food and a coin. Usually the *arati* ceremony is performed by the girl's aunts blessed with progeny.<sup>6</sup>

Though most of the ceremonies mentioned here are performed by the Vellalars, many other castes, too, observe them in a general way.

### Marriage

Ideal partners for marriage are cross-cousins and marriage is absolutely prohibited among first cousin. This is in sharp contrast to the practice prevalent among the Tamils of South India. Cross cousin marriage is encouraged on two counts: to foster the already existing bond and to keep the properties within the circle of close relatives.



The parents of the bride are bound to give dowry to the bridegroom. This system, which has been a well-established institution in many countries ( e.g. Greece and Rome ) and epochs ( e.g. even in modern Europe ) and which originated perhaps for the purpose of providing support for the wife on the husband's death, has turned out to be a real burden on the bride's family because of the size of the dowry. The amount of the dowry varies in direct proportion to the educational qualification and grade of economic status. One wonders whether the custom of cross-cousin marriage in Jaffna is a device to counteract the evils of unreasonable dowry demand.

The ceremony of marriage need not take place in a temple. Well before the appointed time, the brother of the bride goes to the house of the bridegroom accompanied by relatives, servants ( if any ), barber and washerman. The bridegroom, after a bath, goes in procession to the home of the bride ( or to the temple ). The Hindu priest chants *mantras*, and lights the sacred fire, a custom unknown to the ancient Tamils. The bridegroom ties the *tali*, sealing officially thereby the marriage contract. After performing a few others religious rituals such as going round the fire, stepping on a grinding-stone ( *ammi mitithal* ) and pointing at the star called *aruntati*, a symbol of chastity, the new couple drink milk and eat-plantain behind closed doors.<sup>7</sup>

The marriage festivities last usually for four days.

Christians get their marriages solemnised in churches. The tying of *tali* and the giving of *koorai* are considered important ceremonial acts.

Another practice, related to the period after marriage may be mentioned here. After the menses, the married woman gets a clean cloth from the washerman for her bath. The young wife is considered lucky if she gets the first sight of her husband after the bath. If, on the other hand, she happens to see a deformed person, it is feared that a child conceived in this period will be deformed. The appropriate time for conception is considered to be the fortnight after bath following menses. The woman who wants to have a baby is advised to take an oil bath during that fortnight. The fact that formally temples conducted festivals throughout the night during the fourteen days of the waning moon is pointed out as an example of how couples were helped to practice natural birth control as

this fortnight is considered most favourable for conception.<sup>8</sup>

It is the practice in Jaffna that people visiting the house of a woman in confinement takes betel and arecanuts as presents.<sup>9</sup>

## Funerals

It is the duty of the eldest son to lead the procession to the burial ground and set fire to the pyre called *padai*. Just before the procession to the cremation grounds, the body is bathed, usually under a *pandal*, and rice or coins are placed on the mouth of the dead. When a Vellala dies, the pyre is prepared by the Pallars and is carried by Koviars, accompanied by the barber, and washerman. The procession is led by drummers beating the tomtom.

Christians do not cremate but bury their dead.

It is a custom in Jaffna that besides the free service rendered by relatives, friends and neighbours during the period between the death and the funeral, near relatives and neighbours send cooked food to the members of the household in mourning.<sup>10</sup>

## Beliefs

Countless beliefs, which might be categorised as superstitions by “enlightened outsiders”, affect the behaviour of many, including the educated, and influence consequently to a great extent the social life of the people of Jaffna.

\* *Kannuru* or evil or envious glance, and *navuru* or envious words of praise. Fundamental to this belief is the notion that an envious person can cause harm to a happy, successful and talented person. One of the reason, so it is claimed, why high fences are put up during the construction of houses is to “provide some protection against the tongue and eye misfortunes, *navuru* and *kannuru* respectively”.<sup>11</sup>

\* The calling out of small crows announces the visit of a relative or friends. The chirping of house lizards confirm whatever a person is saying at the time and may mean good fortune.

\* When someone sets out on a journey or gets up from bed, bad sights of rattle snakes, widows, beggars, wild animals, black-coloured cats etc. mean illness, disorder and misfortune.

\* Snakes, frogs, wild birds and large crows possess the power to “disharmonise a woman’s system” and thus cause infertility. Women and children should be protected from these creatures.<sup>12</sup>

\* A couple’s barrenness may be due to the fact that they are under the curses of gods, Brahmins, animals or stars. Many rituals may be performed in order to get rid of the curses. Childless couples who believe that they are under the curse of snakes may pay annual homage to the guardian goddess of cobras at Nainativu, the island of cobras.<sup>13</sup>

\* If a cobra is found in a home, it should not be hurt but, if possible, taken to the temple with offerings. Children born in that house are then named Nagalingham, Nagabushani, Nageswari etc., all bearing the term *naga*, the Tamil term for cobra.

\* Many people believe that cobras carry a precious stone in its hood. They are said to place them in a safe spot while they go in search of food without wandering far of from the spot where they leave their stones. The stones, it is said, may be taken if they are covered with cowdung. Cobras die without the stone. It is believed that at Nainativu, where there are many cobras and where the temple is dedicated to the goddess of the cobras, many gems have been seen shining on dark nights.

\* Beside the cobras, cows, cats, peacocks and cocks are sacred. By voluntarily killing a cat, one commits a heinous crime because the “life of a cat is equated with the lives of nine Brahmins”.<sup>14</sup> Cocks and peacocks are sacred to Murugan and hence are to be respected.

\* Pigeons are to be tended only in temple premises and not in houses, because the wealth of a family which domesticates them may vanish when they fly away from the house.

\* Nocturnal birds such as owls are harbingers of disaster. "When the bird having death shrieks for its key note, *sakkuruvi* ( hooting owl ), flies across the roof of a house, the inmates are in a panic. Elders advise them to expose the roof by removing few tiles, to kill a fowl in expiation, or ( if vegetarians ) to cut up an ash-pumpkin smeared with turmeric".<sup>15</sup>

\* There are *munis* ( spirits ) and demons dwelling in groves, trees, ruins or road junctions. When a sudden death occurs at a certain spot which is near a suspected place of demonic power, a sacrifice ( *pali* ) is believed to have taken place.

\* *Mantiravati*, namely a sorcerer, can call upon an evil spirit to possess and do harm to certain persons. This is called *suniyam*, literally meaning emptiness or nothing.

\* Moon is sacred. It is a symbol of warm love. Hence nubile girls "worship" it, till a partner is found. After the marriage, however, it should not be held in high esteem because of its qualities of waning and waxing, "casting gloom and light in quick alternation".<sup>16</sup> Another instance : a grandmother catches the swift view of the moon three nights after the full moon and calls out her children and grandchildren, usually sons and grandsons. Without losing her glimpse of the moon, she kisses each one of them. Then she gets hold of the first child that comes to her "grip" and turns her look from the moon to the face of the child. That child is considered the luckiest of all.<sup>17</sup>

Volumes may be written on the innumerable beliefs of the people of Jaffna. Many Jaffnese, however, are firmly convinced that their forefathers had discovered the rules ( *muraikal* ) of ritual which make it possible for them both to protect themselves against evil super-natural powers that may attack and ruin them, and to get help from other good powers that would help them.<sup>18</sup>

Most people in Jaffna who " are more or less constantly aware of the celestial bodies and use them as guides and markers" consciously or unconsciously believe in astrology.<sup>19</sup>

Two systems of time are observed in Jaffna: civil time and religious time. The first one is based on Europeans calendar and is used to regulate mundane activities in day to day life. The second system, which is a mixture of solar and lunar calendars, is based on the Hindu and Tamil astronomical and astrological systems and coordinates religious activities.<sup>20</sup>

Almanacs called *pancankams*, containing information on solar days, lunar days, asterisms, *yogas* and *karanas* or certain astrological divisions of the days of month, indicate auspicious and inauspicious days and times, and thus regulate the activities of daily life.

Basic to the religious time is the grouping of days following the full moon ( *paruvam* ) and new moon ( *amavasai* ). Each day in this group has a name such as *astami* ( eighth ), *navami* ( ninth ) and *tasami* ( tenth ) and these designate auspicious or inauspicious days for particular purposes. These fourteen days are divided into bad ( *sunya* ) neutral ( *atiti* ) or good ( *tuvayam* ) The conjunction of the sun and the moon in the planetary ( *naksashtra* ) segments is called *yoga*, which is divided into *sittayoga* or auspicious and *maranayoga* or inauspicious. It is by combining these various factors that times for particular activities are recommended or discouraged. For example, *marana yoga* ( *m* ) is not good for any undertaking and a marriage taking place at this time is doomed to fail. During *astami* and *navami*, no new or important undertaking should be initiated.

There are only two solar-based festivals: New Year and *Thai Ponkal*. On New Year, the vernal equinox, the sun enters into the Aries sign of the Zodiac. On the day of *Ponkal*, which is the first day of the month of *Thai* ( January - February ), winter solstice is celebrated which in fact occurs on 22nd December.

Certain days of the week are considered special for certain people. Friday and Tuesday are days of fasting for some; only vegetarian food is eaten and a visit to the temple is made. Young women who have difficulties in finding a husband because of "mars affliction" fast on Tuesdays and visit specific temples. Saturday is normally the day of oil bath; sesame oil is applied to head and body; vegetarians eat food containing protein while meat is consumed by others.

It is also the belief of many that if a girl attains puberty on Monday, she will be an example of chastity; if it occurs on Tuesday, she might become a widow in her early years of marriage; if it occurs on Wednesday, when she will be very rich; Thursday brings disaster because she will not be virtuous; other days are also considered not lucky because she might become poor. The time of the day is also important: the best time is the morning. If she happens to wear a white cloth, she will be lucky. If she notices the marks on her by herself, she will not be lucky. <sup>20</sup>

### Foot Notes

1. See Raghavan, M.D., **India in Ceylonese History, Society and Culture**, New Delhi 1969, p.180. Some details regarding *nalupura* house were supplied by Mr. A. Rasanayagam.
2. Cook, Elsie K., **op. cit.**, p. 308
3. See Raghavan, M. D., **India in Ceylonese History Society and Culture**, p.178
4. **Ibid.**, p. 179
5. See Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon** , p. 202
6. **Ibid.**, pp. 194-196
7. **Ibid.**
8. **Ibid.**, p. 196
9. Pillay, K. K., **op. cit.**, p. 9
10. **Ibid.**, p. 150
11. Pfaffenberger, B., **op. cit.**, p. 127
12. **Ibid.**, p. 100
13. Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 292  
It is related that at Nagerkovil, a coastal village near Thalaiyadi, when the Portuguese were loading the villagers in the boats to take them as slaves, a cobra appeared and ordered the captain to release the prisoners. See Mayer, Elisabeth & Eric, **Sri Lanka. Ceylan et ses Populations**, Bruxelles 1979, p. 79

14. Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 292
15. **Ibid.**, p. 291
16. **Ibid.**, p. 283
17. **Ibid.**, pp. 283 - 284
18. Pfaffenberger, B., **op. cit.**, pp. 96 - 97
19. Perinpanayaagam, R. S., **op.cit.**, pp. 46 - 52. The Hindu astronomy divides the Zodiac into twelve sections corresponding to the Greek division. There is another lunar Zodiac which is divided into twelve seven *nakshatras* or asterisms. These are lunar stations or mansions through which the moon passes. The moon has four phases. A lunar month consists of 30 lunar days which is equal to 29 1/2 solar days. The lunar month is divided into two halves, the bright fortnight of the waxing moon and the dark fortnight of the waning moon. Days are generally indicated by relating it either to the full-moon day or to the new-moon day. There are, in addition, nine planets some of which wield good influences and others bad. "A combination of influences existed by the signs of Zodiac, planets and stars that are ascendant at any given time govern the course of events" (Ratnam . S. A., **Tamil Festivals** , p. 13) The festive, auspicious and inauspicious days are indicated in the Almanac. The Jaffna **Vaieka Panchankam** issued by Ramalinga Iyer of Araly in 1667 is said to be the first "Tamil National Calendar". See Navaratnam , C. S. , **op.cit.**, p. 199
20. See Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon.**, p. 194-195 Though these are the beliefs of the Vellalars, they may be taken to reflect the beliefs of many others in Jaffna.

## CRAFTS

Jaffna, in many ways very different from the rest of the country, has fostered and encouraged certain crafts and industries quite special to itself, for these are determined to a great extent by the region's natural resources and environment. Some of Jaffna's artisans were known for the mastery of tools and techniques coupled with an understanding of the raw materials at hand.

Jaffna is a land of palmyrahs. This *karpaka* (celestial) tree has shaped the simple life of its people for hundreds of years. Its stout timber, whose grain is longitudinal and could easily split into beams and rafts, possesses the quality of durability, and hence it has become an export product.

Out of palmyrah juice called *toddy*, *kallakaram*, a medicinal molasses-like sugar candy, is made.

Mats, four-cornered caps well suited to protect the heads from the hot sun, large-sized baskets for drawing water from the wells, hats and betel pouches are made out of palmyrah leaves. Hats made out of the wiry and strong rib of the leaves are weather-proof and were used exclusively by the working classes. These articles, however, were of "too coarse a texture to command a market outside Jaffna".<sup>1</sup> Ropes and brushes are made out of the strong fibre supplied by the stems of the palmyrahs.

Weaving has remained a productive industry since ancient times.



In fact, Point Pedro, one of the northern ports of the Peninsula, bears the Tamil name Paruttiturai, which means the "Cotton Port". Clothes made in ancient times have been likened in the Tamil Classics to "slough of serpents" and "vapour of milk"; they were so exquisitely manufactured that the threads and cross-threads of the fabric could not be discerned.<sup>2</sup> It could be that the Tamils of Jaffna, too, acquired such a mastery in this field.

The Dutch who took special interest in this industry brought a group of weavers called Chenia Chetties from Andhra Pradesh, South India and settled them in Jaffna. They produced sarees and other clothes. A class of weavers who pride themselves as belonging to the caste of the Tamil sage and poet Tiruvalluvar is still engaged in this industry in homes or cottages. These weavers use hand-looms and, in earlier days, produced "coarse chelais (sarees) and towels and canvas for sails".<sup>3</sup>

An observer describes how these skilled people worked under primitive condition: "The weaver takes his station under a shed where he stretches his warp thread ( nesavupa ) between two wooden rollers which are fastened to the floor with wooden pins. He digs a pit in the ground large enough to put his legs when in a sitting posture; and then suspending to a rafter of the roof the cords which are intended to cause the raising and depressing of the warp threads, he fixes underneath two loops for his toes by which he produces a substitute for treadles. His shuttle acts also as a batten or lay and completes his simple arrangements.

The first operation called warping consists in laying the requisite number of threads together to form the width of the cloth. In the language of the weavers the warp threads are the long threads and the weft (udu) are the cross threads. The yarn wound in the bobbins as it leaves the hand of the spinner is stretched at full length in an open space. Supposing there are to be 500 threads in the width of a piece of cloth, the threads unwound and laid out are arranged into 500 parallel lengths constituting the warp of the intended cloth.

The shuttle with the weft thread passing through the alternate raisings and depressings of the threads forward and backward is worked by the weaver who at same time works the batten and the loops that lift and depress the threads alternately".<sup>4</sup>

There were two methods of dyeing cloth: *melukeluthu*, in which wax was used, and *tannireluthu*, in which no wax was used. Dyed clothes with black, red and blue border lines were made by the first method. By the second, lines and designs were drawn on the sarees and other textiles.

Goldsmiths of Jaffna, according to E. Tennent, were "ingenious and excellent workmen" who produced fine and tasteful bangles, chains and rings.<sup>5</sup> They specialised in delicate ornamental work formed of intertwined gold or silverware ( filigree ) and also in the production of granulated bangles, the surface of which were adorned with raised designs. Vannarponnai and Nallur were the chief centres of gold and silver work.

Metal casting was another specialized industry. This technique, which was also connected with the art of sculpturing in stone, helped to produce sacred images, agricultural items and domestic articles such as lamps and trays. Specialists who were involved in this craft initially were artisans from South India who are known today as Satapatias.<sup>6</sup> Lamps and images were made mainly in Vannarpannai and Nallur, and knives and spades (*mamoties*) were made at Mathanai near Point Pedro and at Ilavalai.<sup>7</sup>

The archaeological discovery of iron smelting forges may point to the existence of iron industry in ancient times.

Pottery was, and still is, a flourishing village industry. Potsherders have been discovered in the ancient villages of Jaffna. The village of Chankanai has earned a good reputation for this industry and has fulfilled the local needs.

The art of dyeing seems to have been well-developed in Jaffna. Dye root plants, whose roots are three to nine inches long and are "as thin as twine", grew wild and in abundance in Delft, Manipay, Chulipuram and Ilavalai in the Jaffna Peninsula. <sup>8</sup>

Craftsmen handling wood work also made their presence felt. Artistic walking sticks, bullock carts were made by carpenters of Vaddukkoddi and horse-carriages were made at Vannarpannai.<sup>9</sup>

This essay will be incomplete if mention were not made of cigar making, production of oil, manufacture of salt and medicine. Cigar making is done by hand and the Jaffna cigar received a gold medal at the St. Louis exhibition in 1904,<sup>10</sup> Oil is produced by crushing copra, gingeili, *iluppai*, castor and other seeds. Locally designed mills called *chekku* and *utumaram* are used.<sup>11</sup>

Salt was artificially produced in the pans at Chiviyateru in Jaffna it is also manufactured at Elephant Pass.<sup>12</sup>

Men of medicine whose expertise and knowledge were handed down from generation to generation follow a Tamil system called *siddha vaithiyam* They make drugs from herbs and are experts in treating poisoned conditions such as snakebites.<sup>13</sup>

#### Foot Notes

1. **All-Ceylon Industries Exhibition 1922 Handbook, Guide and Directory**, Colombo 1922, p. 18. Henceforth cited as **Exhibition**.
2. Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 257
3. Reference is made to the second decade of this century. **Exhibition**, p. 16
4. **Ibid.**, p. 17
5. **Ibid.**, p. 19
6. Raghavan, M.D., **Tamil culture in Ceylon**, p. 259
7. **Exhibition**, p. 20
8. **Ibid.**, p. 14
9. **Ibid.**, p. 20. Temple cars were made by the carpenters of Jaffna.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 17
11. **Ibid.**, p. 19
12. **Ibid.**, p. 20
13. See Navaratnam, C. S., **op.cit.**, p. 201. It is stated that the Kings of Jaffna encouraged able physicians to write books on medicine which were then revised by a body of experts. **Pararajasekaram** and **Segarajasekaram** were such books on medicine. There was also a "herbarium at Kalliyankadu where some rare herbs were preserved. The Maruthuvalalai, the best variety of the Jaffna plantain was so named because it was grown in the Maruthuva Thodam (herbarium.) Similarly the blue lotus (chenkkalanir) a rare variety of lotus has been preserved in Jaffna from extinction". **Ibid.**

## ARTS

Even though in such fields as architecture, sculpture, painting, music and dance, the Tamils of the Peninsula (indeed, the Tamils of Sri Lanka) followed the trends and patterns prevalent in South India, there is one area in which they put their stamp of originality and indiginity: *Naddu Koothu* or Folk Play. It consists of dancing, acting and musical dialogue inextricably interwoven. Being a "vital element in the community life of the Tamil people,"<sup>1</sup> it reflected in many ways the customs and manners of the people as well as the distinct phases of their social and institutional life. Though it was in a "moribund condition primarily because it has been denied the social status it once enjoyed, by the sophisticated society"<sup>2</sup> of colonial times, much has been done in recent years to present it as the national heritage of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

There were various types of *Koothu*: *Vasanthan Koothu*, *Paramela Koothu*, *Kaman Koothu*, *Kathan Koothu*, *Vadamodi Koothu*, *Thenmodi Koothu*. Among these, the first two consist of singing and dancing without much of a well-knit story; in addition, they were merely repeated in the same form as they were written originally without any change or adaptation.<sup>3</sup> *Kaman Koothu* focuses on the mythical story of Siva burning Kaman, the god of love, and *Kathan Koothu* narrates the puranic story of the hero Kathavarayan, a creature of Siva's consort, Parvati. According to Vithiyananthan, who was greatly responsible for making *Koothu* "modern" and "respectable", "episodes from North Indian Literature are enacted" in *Vadamodi* or Northern type and "South Indian and indigenous themes" are generally to be found in *Thenmodi* or Southern types; besides, these two types also have different music, dress and dance forms.<sup>4</sup>

Further, *Thenmodi* is claimed to be more ancient than *Vadamodi* which is "akin to the modern dance".<sup>5</sup>

Sillaiyur Selvarajan, a knowledgeable artist and poet, characterises *Thenmodi* and *Vadamodi* in the following manner:

*Vadamodi* - Theme: Hindu epics and puranas  
Stress: Heroism or bravery  
More : Dancing  
Less : Musical Singing  
(New : North Indian Melodies introduced)

*Thenmodi* Theme: Christian stories  
Stress : Love  
More : Musical Singing  
Less : Dancing

Selvarajan admits that before the advent of Catholicism, *Thenmodi* depicted Hindu themes, but those scripts are not available today.<sup>6</sup> According to him, in *Thenmodi* there exist rich variations in singing from region to region, and from the manner in which melodies are sung, one can know the character of the people of a region.

It is important to note that Roman Catholics, who are credited with having preserved and fostered *Thenmodi Koothu*, made use of this form of art to propagate their religion during the time of the Portuguese and later to safeguard it under the Dutch. Rev. Philippus Baldeus, the Dutch Calvinist Minister, mentions that most churches of Roman Catholics had "scaffolds or theatres" near them where events from the Bible were enacted on holydays.<sup>7</sup>

It is quite possible that the Catholic missionaries who came from Goa and from South India influenced to a great extent the Catholic tradition of *Naddu Koothu* and hence even the term *Thenmodi* might be a pointer to the South Indian connection.<sup>8</sup>

*Naddu Koothu*, which according to many is derived from the

South Indian *Therukkuthu*, literally Street Play, of South India, was performed originally in the open air and usually on a circular platform, which was raised from the ground with earth or sand. There were no seats, no props and no change of scenes. Oil-torches were the only lighting devices. Actors moved in a circle or moved round about half the circumference in order to make themselves visible to the audience seated round the raised platform and to make themselves heard by it. Instead of the curtains, a piece of cloth was used behind which actors could stand before they were introduced to the audience by the regisseur of the play called *annavi*.

The staging of *Koothu* had its social or group dimension and dynamics. It was the collective "ritual" and festival of the entire village where it was held. <sup>9</sup> Relatives of actors, singers and musicians and other people from neighbouring villages were invited to, and were present at, the performance.

There were some usual ceremonies (in many villages) that were connected with the production and performance of a *Koothu*. The ceremony of casting (for the play) was called *saddankoduthal*. Those who wanted to take part had to undergo an audition test. Certain roles were reserved for certain families for various reasons. Participants chosen for a role (or roles) were handed their parts written on *olas* or palmyrah leaves (nowadays on paper) by a person of eminence and respect.

After this initial ceremony, rehearsals went on almost every night for four or five months.

Next followed a ceremony called *sathankai*, which lasted from morning till late in the evening to which people from neighbouring villages were invited. This ceremony consisted in the wearing of anklets by the actors. This was followed by *Kizhamaikkoothu* in which actors, wearing the anklets, performed during the day.

Nearly a week before the final performance, the entire play was staged without costumes. This event was called *velluduppu*.

The day of performance had an air of festival. Crackers were fired and hospitality was extended to all the relatives and friends who had

come to see the play from other villages. During the performance, friends and relatives garlanded the actors, pinned notes of cash on their costumes or donated ornaments of gold.

After the performance, all the cast and some spectators went to the temple to dance and sing.

Catholics went to the nearby church to sing a concluding benediction called *mankalam*.

Often, actors went in a group to houses of their relatives and families of prominence to receive due honour and gifts.

It was also usual for unmarried young men to get married after taking part in such a performance.

In conclusion, the following observations may be made regarding *Koothu*:

Firstly, the *Naddu Koothu* of the Tamils of Sri Lanka have preserved the fundamental conception of drama as a dance, namely the representation of a series of actions "through rhythmic motion". Indeed, the expression for dramatic performance in Tamil - *nadagam adinan* or *koothu adinan* - which means he danced the play, aptly connotes the essence of theatre as traditionally understood by Tamils.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, *Naddu Koothu* has many elements of symbolic theatre. Many actions and settings may be and are mimed. "Consequently dramatists need not always look to the West for inspiration about pure or total theatre.

Thirdly, though most of the themes and stories of *Naddu Koothu* were and still are religious and moral in character, reflecting perhaps the didactical nature of *Koothu*, one need not do away with or even minimise the perennial value of such general and universal themes in favour of touching the "needs of the present society". This means that themes affecting the present should be developed without abandoning the age old ones".

Fourthly, though *Naddu Koothu* was usually associated with people from lower strata of society earlier and "has necessarily been practiced in isolation", a new awareness has dawned in the last few years that it is neither *Bharata Natyam* nor *Kathakali* but *Naddu Koothu* which is the cultural heritage of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

Lastly, a comment on the present state of Performing Arts in Jaffna may not be out of place. It is true that researches and academic studies on theatre are being carried out by the Fine Arts Faculty of the Jaffna University. It is also true that there has been a significant number of modern and exquisite performances in various parts of the Peninsula inspired by the trends set at the University. However, it should be placed on record that Tirumari Kalamamram ( Centre for Performing Arts, Jaffna) has not only produced a variety of plays ( devotional and social, historical and mythical, musical and wordless, avantgarde as well as traditional) but also has played a concerted and well-planned role in fostering *Naddu Koothu* as the cultural heritage of the Tamils of Sri Lanka.

### Foot Notes

1. Vithianathan, S., "Tamil Folk Drama in Ceylon" in **Tamil Culture** Vol. XI, No. 2, 1964, p. 165
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sillaiyer Selvarajan in an interview in **Kalaimugam** 1992 April-June. Sillaiyer laments the fact that due to social changes, *Paramela Koothu* has completely disappeared.
4. Vithianathan, S., *op.cit.*, p. 167
5. Professor Sarachchandra cited in Raghavan, M.D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 267
6. Sillaiyer Selvarajan, *op.cit.*
7. Baldeus, Philippus, **A True and Exact Description of Ceylon**, cited in Raghavan, M. D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 266
8. See Suntharampillai, Karai "Katholikka marapudan thodarpulla Koottukkal" in **Kalai Mugam** 1992 April-June
9. See Madras Mail, "Janaracakakkalai Marapuvazhikkoothu" in **Kalai Mugam** 1994 Jan-March, pp. 7-8
10. Vithianathan, S., *op.cit.*, p. 168. See also Asirvatham, John E., **Tamilar Koothukal**, Madras, pp. 179-224
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 172



## SPORTS

Sports, as organised physical exercises for recreation or in competition, are barometers of, among other things, the health, creativity, adaptability, ingenuity and sociability of a people. Many forms of traditional sports found in Jaffna shed much light on the way of life of the people of Jaffna.

### Kiddi

*Kiddi* is a game which is played with a stick of about 1½ feet in length and a smaller stick of about 3 to 4 inches long. The longer stick is called *kiddi* and the smaller stick is called *pullu*. *Pullu* is placed across on a small dent made on the ground with enough space to insert one end of the *kiddi* under the *pullu*. The player holding the *kiddi* at the other end heaves it hard to send it as far as possible in the field. If the *pullu* is caught in the air, the player is declared out and the next member of his team takes over. If *pullu* is not caught, the striker places his *kiddi* behind the dent at a distance equal to the length of the *kiddi*. If the fielder who picks up the *pullu* throws it from the spot and strikes the *kiddi*, the striker is out. If not, the striker holds the *pullu* in one of his hands and strikes it with *kiddi*. If the *pullu* is caught by any fielder, the striker is out. Otherwise, the *pullu* is thrown at the dent. If the striker hits it, he measures the distance with the *kiddi*. The number of times he measures becomes the number of points for his team. If the *pullu* falls within a radius of the length of the *kiddi* from the dent, the striker is out. This process goes on till the striking team gets 100 points or all of them are out before they score those points.<sup>1</sup>

When a team hits the century, it goes on a "striking course" by a striker throwing the *kiddi* in front of him at a fairly good distance, but not close very to him, and throws the *pullu* at the *kiddi*. If he succeeds in hitting the *kiddi*, he continues the process. If he fails, another member of his team takes over and so it goes on till all the members of the team have had their chance. The team could also decide to terminate the striking course which would be similar to declaring an innings.

Thereafter one of the fielders takes the *pullu* in his hand and runs towards the dent making an audible uninterrupted humming sound. This is known as taking *kuii* as the fielder starts with the sound *kuii*. From the spot where he stops making the *kuii*, the *pullu* is hit back by the other side and another member of the fielding side takes the *kuii*. This goes on till the fielding team reaches the dent thereby scoring victory. If the team does not complete the *kuii*, the team loses.

The power of long breath and fast running play an important role in this game.

There are slight variations too.<sup>2</sup> At times, *pullu* is hit both ways, namely with the forehand and the back hand. The first form is called *mel kiddi* and the second *kizh kiddi*. Sometimes, the distance is also measured with the *pullu* if the striker opts to hit the *pullu* again without measuring the distance with the *kiddi*.

### **Paddam**

Flying musical kite called *paddam* is one of the main sports in the Peninsula. The best season is from April to August, when there is suitable wind. This also coincides with the period of rest and leisure following intense work in the fields.

Musical kite, which is said to have originated in Aeolis in Asia Minor, comes in many forms and shapes.<sup>3</sup> The bird kite, known as *paruntukkodi*, is the most popular in Jaffna. It is built on a frame of bam, bamboo strips. The central piece is called *naduthadi*, the two wing strips *ciruthadi*, and the tail *valthadi*. There are two balancing strings called *thaimutchai* and *makal mutchai* which are attached to a ball of a long string. The frame is pasted usually with white and brown colour. The musical

components are the bow called *vinthadi*, which is a “flexible strip of the areca palm equal in length to the Naduthadi”, the bow string, which is “a strip of palmyrah leaf stalk fixed to the ends of the bow” and a piece of wood called *sutakkaddai* or *suruthikkaddai*. The wind carries the kite aloft “controlled by the string and the resistance of the atmosphere” and the kite “rises up like an angered cobra.” When it goes up “the wind has free play on the bow string and the vibrations producing a sound quite musical, the resonance alternating with the frequency of the vibration”.<sup>4</sup>

Those who participate in this sport have to calculate favourable wind velocities so that the kite may soar up and float high. If the winds are good, the kite is left to remain in the sky and is tied with a string to a post. “The maximum height a kite reaches is judged by the length of the string sent up. Strings are not measured, but an estimation is made of the volume of the ball of the string used for each. When the game of competition is over and the kites are hauled down, the balls of string are compared and the man whose roll is the biggest declared the winner.”<sup>5</sup>

Three areas may be mentioned which have been centres of this sport: Point Pedro, Chavakacheri and Kayts.

Some speculate that this sport, which is also popular in the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Islands, “has originated and flourished in the cultural setting of Jaffna and spread over to Malaya and beyond”.<sup>6</sup>

### Thaychi

*Thaychi* or *Kizhithaddu* is a vagourous game which demands great skill, agility and dexterity of the body and mind. The playing court consists of a block with a frontage of about 30 to 40 feet in length with parallel lines drawn at distances of about 6 feet, thus having several rectangles one below the other. A vertical line is drawn in the middle dividing the rectangles into two smaller rectangles on either side. The number of rectangles could be increased or decreased according to the availability of players.

The players of one team, who, by a form of toss, become “defenders”, will stand on the parallel lines, one on each line to prevent the members of the other team, known as “attackers”, crossing the parallel lines

and ultimately crossing the last line. A player who crosses the last line becomes a *pazham*, a ripe fruit. He could wait at the back of the court till the rest of his team had crossed the last line or he could re enter the court after announcing that he intended to reach the point of departure. If he succeeds in reaching and crossing the first line, he wins a point for his team. If he re enters the court when his team mates, who are known as *kay*, raw fruit, are still struggling to cross the lines, he should make sure that he does not step into any of the smaller rectangles where one or many of his companions may be locked in; his breaking through the defence will be more difficult as he as well the *kay* in the other half of the rectangle, will have only a restricted movement to outwit and outplay the defenders. The defender from whom a *kay* escapes would then turn back and block the *pazham* from breaking through.

It is to be noted that to break through the defence line the “attacker” has to cross the line without getting tapped by the “defender” while he crosses. One can get tapped only when the attacker is over the line and not before or after he had crossed the line.

There is an important player in the defence who is known as *kizhi*, a parrot. He has the freedom to move about the court on all the frames and also on the dividing vertical line. If he taps the attacker while the latter crosses or even stands at a “touchable distance,” the attacker would be disqualified and his team would lose. The team becomes then the defending team. *Kizhi*, however, should take care that while he touches the attacker, he should not step inside the court to reach him. He should always be on the line.

The above process goes on until a certain number of combats decided upon earlier had been carried out. The team that gets the most number of points wins the game.

Needless to say that the game is a vigorous and exhausting one. The crossing of the lines demands much skill, agility and speed. The attacker prances about within the rectangle like a panther in a cage.

Until recently tournaments were conducted regularly in which teams from community centres and sports organisations took part. There were definite rules and regulations governing these events.

### **Kuzhai edukkirathu**

*Kuzhai edukkirathu*, meaning literally taking a branch of leaves and sprouts, is a game in which one team attempts to get hold of a small branch of leaves placed in the middle of two teams of players separated from each other by about fifty yards. It is also called *adu puli addam* (sheep and tiger game) because the one who attempts to take the bunch of leaves is called a sheep and the one who protects him from being touched by the other side is called a tiger.

### **Var**

Var is another vigorous game for the boys. Participants are divided into two groups. Three lines are drawn, two just in front of both teams standing apart thirty yards from each other and one right in the middle. A player goes to the opponents' side, touches the palm of an opponent and swiftly runs away from him. The latter begins chasing him in order to touch him; but once he crosses the middle line, he himself becomes an easy target to be caught by any one of his opponents. The team whose players can run fast and dodge their opponents without getting touched wins the game.

### **Savari**

Savari- bullock cart race- is another folk sport in Jaffna. Bullocks are specially reared to participate in this race. Race carts are sturdier than the usual ones and have a small attached-plank on which the driver lies face down during the race. The racing ground is a vast open area usually more than a mile long. Bullocks are spurred on with sticks attached with small iron rods. Accidents also occur. Participants have to appear for heats and semi finals in the presence of a vast public. The winners get valuable items such as gold chains as prizes.

### **Kental**

There are games for girls, too. *Kental* is a game of hopping on one foot. A small square is divided into double four rectangular spaces. Players throw a tiny nut or stone in each of the rectangles and jump on it on one foot.

## Anna unchal

*Anna unchal*, namely swinging to the rhythm of a song called *kappal paddu*, literally a ship song, was another sport engaged in by girls in villages.

## Foot Notes

1. Some of this information was gathered from J. Menzius, of Montreal, Canada. and Arul Rajendra of Colombo.
2. See Raghavan, M.D., **Tamil Culture in Ceylon**, p. 281
3. According to **The New Encyclopaedia Britannica** (1990), though one "tradition holds that kites were invented in the 5th century. B. C. by Greek scientist Archytas of Tarentum, they "have been in use among Asian peoples from time immemorial." Vol. 6, p. 898; According to **Encyclopedia Americana**(1994), "no one knows exactly when or where the kite was invented: probably in China or Southeast Asia about 1000 B.C." Vol.16, p. 492
4. **ibid.**, p. 276 - 277
5. **ibid.**, p. 278
6. **ibid.**, pp. 279 -280
7. Information gathered from A. Jeyapalan, A. Jeyaseelan and A. Ravinchan of Toronto, Canada.

## JAFFNA - GRAPH

Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a great scholar, statesman and son of the soil of Jaffna, once proudly declared:

“ I have great belief in the Tamil Community. They will be saved by their common sense and marvellous industry, their innate disdain of comfort and spartan simplicity, their long knowledge and love of mother tongue”.<sup>1</sup>

The hard, arid and seemingly forlorn nature of the land, the splendid isolation of the, Jaffna Peninsula from the rest of the Island and an inborn tendency to tread in the footsteps of one's ancestors are factors that contribute to the characteristic features of the species called Jaffna Tamil.

Outsiders have been much impressed by the spirit of hard work found among the Jaffna of people. Since “nature in this land is a stern mother giving her rewards only for hard and earnest toil”,<sup>2</sup> man has to work hard to cultivate enough food for the relatively big population of the Peninsula. The Jaffna as peasantry, with its “thrift and prudence as well as patience and industry”<sup>3</sup> has succeeded in achieving at least partly this goal. **The Ceylon Manual 1912 - 1913** corroborates the above by paying glowing tribute to the “average Tamil of the Peninsula” who is “thrifty and energetic. As a cultivator, by hard manual labour and by an elaborate system of well-irrigation and cultivation, he has converted plains covered with coral rock and sandy soil into prosperous gardens of tobacco, manioc and grains. And as he works hard, when on his own land

and for himself, so he displays the same energy in marking money and position as a clerk, business man, contractor, or trader".<sup>4</sup>

Many unbiased observers are also in accord with this assessment and agree that the "hard working" habits of the Jaffnese, "stand them in good stead when they are in Colombo, and they often become rich, in which case they will usually retire, to their native region".<sup>5</sup>

There are those who toy with the idea that the Sri Lankan Northerner is a "hardier" and "more masculine type" compared to the Southern "softer" and "more feminine type".<sup>6</sup>

Frugality is another quality that is attributed to the people of Jaffna. They are said to live "exceptionally frugally and manage to subsist on very small estates, utilising all sorts of small means of adding to their income".<sup>7</sup> Is it any wonder, then, that the Tamil of Jaffna has been referred to as the "Scotsman of Ceylon"?<sup>8</sup>

A visitor to Jaffna cannot but be stuck by the "extremely conservative" nature of its people.<sup>9</sup> Jane Russell not only describes this state of mind, which some characterise as being "Jaffna-centric"<sup>10</sup> and "serious in their out look"<sup>11</sup>, but also tries to explain the factors that contribute to it:

"The Jaffna Tamil man was fiercely conservative and he maintained a jealous pride in his attachment to the peninsula and to the language, customs and beliefs of his ancestors... It could perhaps be termed a peninsularity of the mind, the spatial isolation of the Northern Province being its most conditioning factor. However when combined with a natural atavism which a British governor described as the preference of the Ceylon Tamil for the methods of his ancestors, this peculiar conservatism becomes an ingrained trait".<sup>12</sup>

The Jaffna peninsula being "an island within an island"<sup>13</sup> has in no small measure contributed to the conservative nature of the Jaffna people. The tall hedges or walls usually made of dried palmyrah or coconut leaves which surround a house in Jaffna not only serve as wind barriers against dust but also are symbolic of the conservative and closed mentality of the indwellers.



Language and the arts, too, act as indicators of the tradition-oriented people of Jaffna. Many archaic words in Tamil are still in use, and until very recently, literature consisted mainly of Classical Tamil called *Senthamil*. *Bharata Natyam* and *Carnatic Music* are still extolled as divine and ancient arts. In a way, “artistic forms which are periodically revitalized by the absorption of radical ideas and giving expression to them were kept hermetically sealed... purely as state symbols and ethnic identity characteristics”.<sup>14</sup>

Even those people who are open and liberal-minded in their places of work outside the Peninsula toe the line as soon as they set foot in Jaffna.

An observation of Pfaffenberger may be relevant and topical in this regard:

“Jaffna’s extreme cultural conservatism has played no small role in the increasingly violent Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka”.<sup>15</sup>

Another quality of the people of Jaffna is their “strong” individualism.<sup>16</sup> This quality, which, in the words of **The Ceylon Manual 1912-1913**, may be called “self - centredness”,<sup>17</sup> leads, among other things, to competition. The construction of houses is a case in point. People build houses in such a way that the shadow of a neighbour’s house does not fall upon theirs ; this is to ensure that the neighbour’s house does not surpass the new building. That enmity might start just because of this does not deter the builder.<sup>18</sup>

The strongly individual character of the Jaffnese was well understood by politicians and leaders such as S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the “Father of the Tamil Nation”. In his view, people from Jaffna were “highly individualistic” and independent minded; hence it needed tremendous effort and dedication to bring them to unite in “their collective determination to win freedom”.<sup>19</sup>

Jaffnese are deeply attached to the public-service oriented education. They value education so highly that the first petition of a Tamil devotee to the deity of a temple is said to be for assistance to get through

*cotanai*, the exam.<sup>20</sup> Though an exaggeration, it contains a grain of truth. **The Ceylon Manual 1912 - 1913** remarked that the "great desire" of the Tamils of Jaffna was for education, and that once educated, they entered Government service or became clerks in mercantile firms or left the Peninsula for a job in Colombo, or on a tea estate in the upcountry, or simply out of the country.<sup>21</sup>

The last mentioned phenomenon, namely the tendency to emigrate out of the country, is understandable in the context of Jaffna's

\* Natural resources being poor and scarce

\* Opportunities of earning a livelihood being limited, and

\* lebensraum being overpopulated .<sup>22</sup>

In the last century, there was a wave of migration of educated Tamils to the Straits Settlements and the Malay States.<sup>23</sup> In fact, according to an unnamed report cited by a reputed author

"Emigration is heaviest from the Jaffna Peninsula and consists largely of educated young men who have been successful in securing clerical and other posts in the other districts of Ceylon and in the scraits settlements. In 1910 the figure of remittances from the Straits Settlements and the Malay States was put at Rs. 602, 878. In 1920 this figure had risen to Rs. 2,120,000." <sup>24</sup>

The new wave of emigration, prompted by the ongoing civil war, reached its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, and this time the destinations were the green pastures of West Europe and North America. <sup>25</sup> Just as Kuala Lumpur earned the name "Little Jaffna" earlier because of the concentration of ex-patriot Tamils from Jaffna,<sup>26</sup> certain areas of Paris and Toronto ( Canada ) today are turning out to be Little Jaffnas.

In conclusion: The Palmyrah palm seems to be a fitting symbol of the character of the people of Jaffna. It flourishes in arid land; it is hardy and sturdy; it withstands storm and tempest; the entire tree is of use to man; the green top portion, when tapped, yields health-giving and wholesome drink.

In this tragic period of its history, the Jaffna Palmyrah is standing tall and unbent; it defies violence and aggression; it is resilient and cannot be broken, come what may. And it seems to be whispering a *mantra* from Atharva Veda:

Peace be to the Earth and to the Air!

Peace be to Heaven, peace to the Waters.

By this invocation of peace, may peace bring peace.

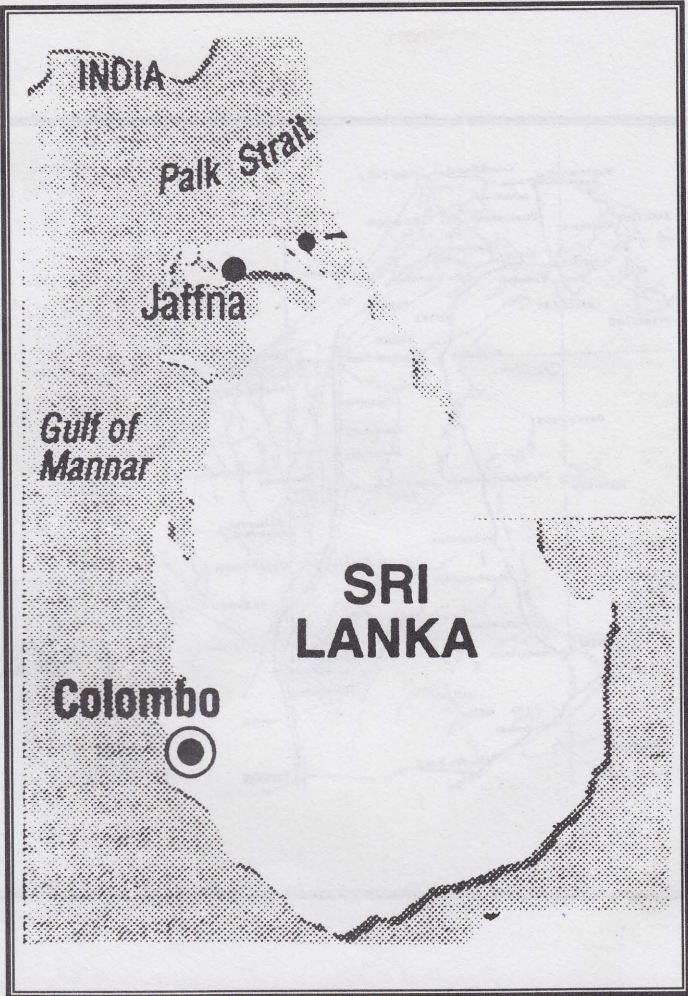
#### Foot Notes

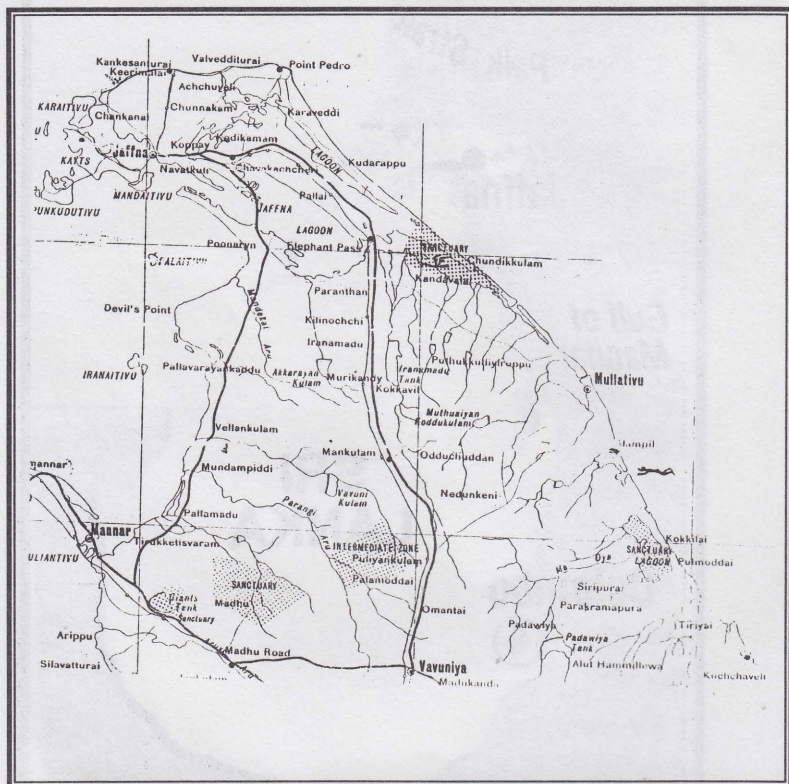
1. Cited in Jane Russell, **The Ceylon Tamils under the Donoughmore Constitution**, Ph. D. Thesis, University of Sri Lanka, Peradeniya 1976, quoted in Sivatomby, K., **op.cit.**, pp. 189-190
2. De Silva, S. F., **op.cit.**, p. 247
3. **ibid.**
4. **Op.cit.**, p. 302
5. Cook, Elsie, K., **op.cit.**, p. 309
6. For a discussion of the attitude-analysis of Northerners and Southerners, see Ehrenfels, U. R., "North-up, South-down" in **Tamil Culture** 1959, pp. 163-171
7. Cook, Elsie, K., **op.cit.**, p.309
8. De Silva, S. F., **op.cit.**, p. 257
9. Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, p. 28
10. Sivatomby, K., **op.cit.**, p. 189
11. Wijetunga, W. M. K., **Sri Lanka in Transition.**, p. 17
12. Jane Russell cited in Sivatomby, K., **op.cit.**, pp. 189-190
13. Meyer, E., **op.cit.**, p. 147
14. Kailasapathi, K., "Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community" in **Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka**, p. 171

15. Pfaffenberger B., **op.cit.**, p. 32
16. Cook, Elsie, K., **op.cit.**, p. 327
17. **Op.cit.**, p. 302
18. Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, pp. 126-127
19. Willson, A. J., S. J. V. Chelvanayagam and the Crisis of  
Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism 1947-1977, London 1994, p. 137
20. See Pfaffenberger, B., **op.cit.**, p. 65
21. **Op.cit.**, p. 302
22. De Silva, S. F., **op.cit.**, p. 257; Meyer, E., **op.cit.**, p.147
23. Meyer, Elisabeth & Eric, **op.cit.**, p. 78
24. De Silva, S. F., **op.cit.**, p. 257
25. Tamils found employment in East Africa too
26. Meyer, Elisabeth & Eric, **op.cit.**, pp.77-78

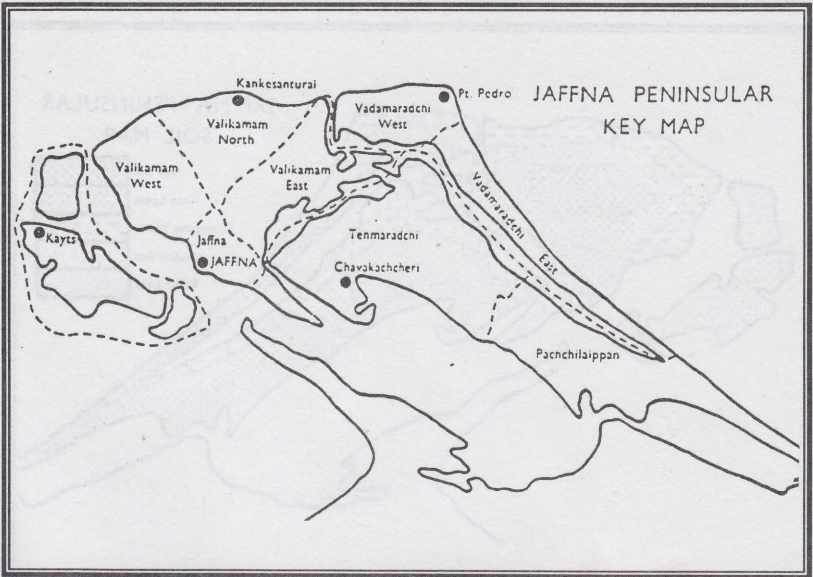
**Appendix: 1**

Σταθμάκια



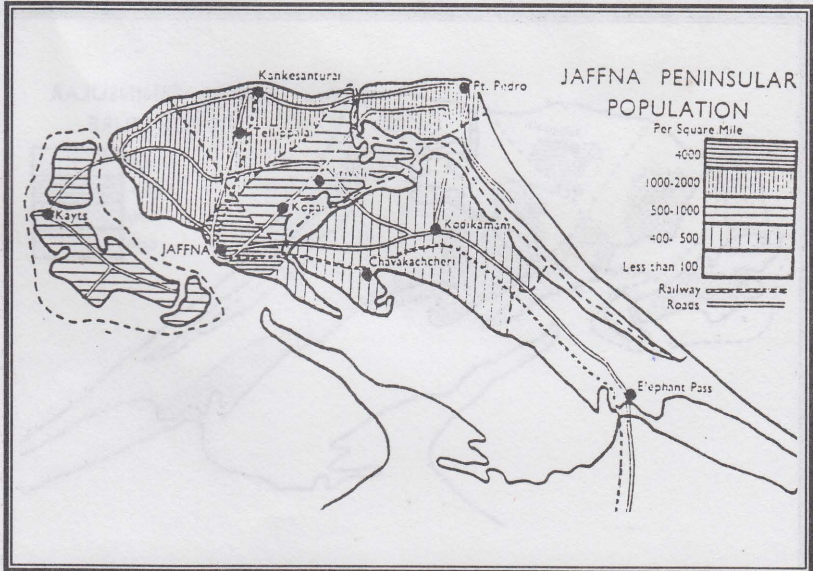


### Appendix: 3



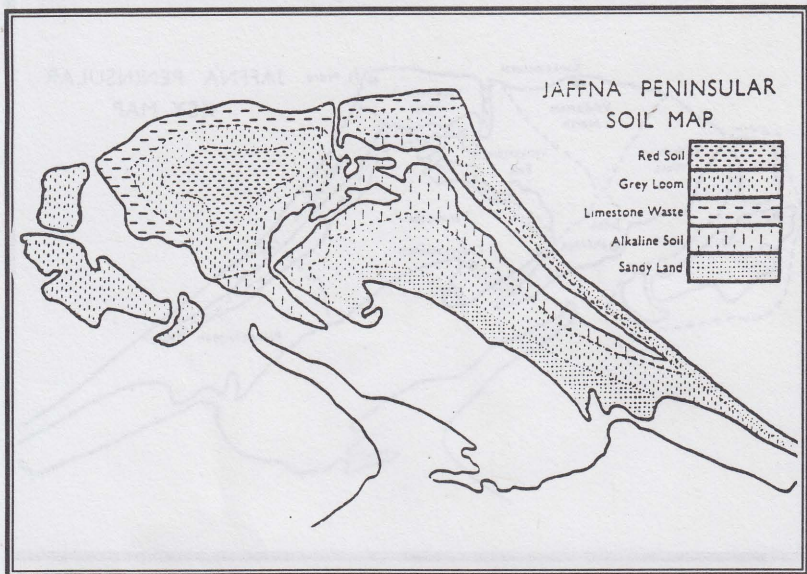
Source: A Regional Geography of Ceylon

### Appendix: 4



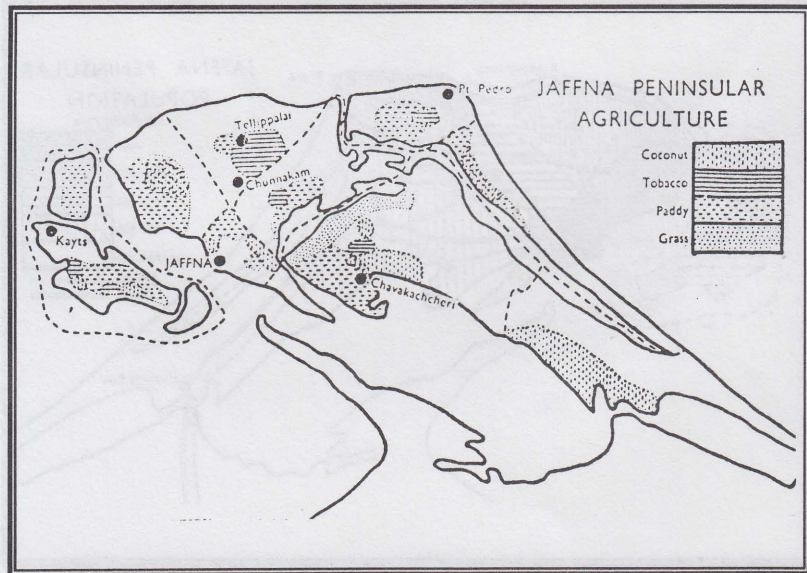
Source: A Regional Geography of Ceylon

## Appendix: 5



Source: A Regional Geography of Ceylon

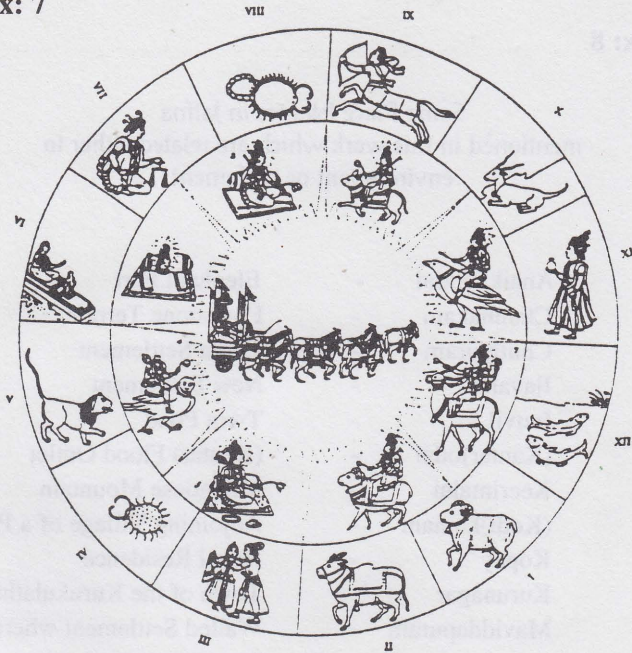
## Appendix: 6



Source: A Regional Geography of Ceylon



# Appendix: 7



## PLANETS

1. Surya
2. Brhaspati
3. Ketu
4. Rahu
5. Budha
6. Mangala
7. Chandra
8. Sani
9. Sukra

## LUNAR MONTHS

<i>Chithirai</i>	April - May
<i>Vaikasi</i>	May - June
<i>Ani</i>	June - July
<i>Adi</i>	July - August
<i>Avani</i>	August - September
<i>Puraddasi</i>	September - October
<i>Aippasi</i>	October - November
<i>Karthikai</i>	November - December
<i>Markazhi</i>	December - January
<i>Thai</i>	January - February
<i>Masi</i>	February - March
<i>Pankuni</i>	March - April

## SOLAR ZODIAC

சூரியன்	<b>GREEK</b>
<i>Medam</i>	Aries
<i>Idapam</i>	Taurus
<i>Mithunam</i>	Gemini
<i>Karkatakam</i>	Cancer
<i>Singam</i>	Leo
<i>Kanni</i>	Virgo
<i>Tulam</i>	Libra
<i>Viruchikam</i>	Scorpio
<i>Thanu</i>	Sagittarius
<i>Makaram</i>	Capricornus
<i>Kumbham</i>	Aquarius
<i>Meenam</i>	Pisces

I. Mesa II. Vrsabha III. Mithuna IV. Karkata V. Simha VI. Kanya VII. Tula VIII. Vrschika IX. Dhanus X. Makara XI. Kumbha XII. Mina.

Source: Tamil Festivals (Ratnam)

## Appendix: 8

Some Place Names in Jaffna  
mentioned in this work which are related either to  
environment or settlement

Anaikkodai	-	Elephant Fort
Chunnakam	-	Limestone Terrain
Chulipuram	-	Chola Settlement
Ilavalai	-	New Settlement
Inuvil	-	Twin Pond
(Kantar)odai	-	(Kantar) Flood Outlet
Keerimalai	-	Mongoose Mountain
(Kodi)kamam	-	Adjoining Village of a Paddy Field
Kopay	-	Royal Residence
Kurunagar	-	Town of the Kurukulathar
Maviddapuram	-	Walled Settlement where Horse- face disappeared
Nager Kovil	-	Cobra Temple / Village
Nallur	-	Good Village
(Nav)ali	-	Place with Sink-holes
Navanthurai	-	Port of Vessels
Pachilaippalli	-	Green Leaf Village / Temple
Paruttiturai	-	Cotton Port
(Po)iddy -	-	Elevated Land
Poonakari	-	Town of Flowers
Tellippalai	-	Fragile Woman's Settlement
Valikamam	-	Sand near Paddy Field
Vannarpannai	-	Settlement of Washermen

Source: P. Ragupathy

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