

An Interpretation of the Term வேள் in Sri Lankan Brahmi Inscriptions as Revealed in Trade Relation Between Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu.

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The interpretation of term வேள் (vel) has been now the focal point of the scholars who study the language of the Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka. It was started by H. Parker who in 1880 read this term in an inscription of Periyapuliyankulam from Northern Sri Lanka as வேளா (vela). Taking the letter ள (l) of this term he reached a conclusion that Northern Sri Lanka was one of the autochthonic regions of the Tamils (Parkar 1981: 436). Rejecting his view and reading, the scholars such as Goldsmith, Muller and H.C.Bell took the letter “ளு” (lu) as the “லு” (lu) of Asokan Brahmi. Hence, they read this term as “வேலு” (velu). S. Paranavitana accepted this view. He took this inscriptional term “வேலு” (Velu) and the term “வேளு” (Velu) which is applied in Pali literature as the same. While saying that the usage of “ளு” (lu) came into vogue only after 2nd c.A.D. in Sri Lanka, he had a view that the application of “ளு” (lu) instead of “லு” (lu) Pali literature was wrong (Paranavitana 1970: XXV). To support this view, he put forward the idea that the terms “கட” (kada) and “அடி” (adi) of the early inscriptions morphophonemically became as “களி” (Kali) and “அளி” (ali) in the inscriptions of the 2nd c.A.D. in Sri Lanka. Although there was a usage of “ட” (da) instead of “ள” (la) in the beginning, both these letters are found in

use in the inscriptions of Northern Sri Lanka. This can disprove S. Paranavitana's above said view. He could be right, it as “வேலு”. S. Karunaratne who held the view that before the introduction of Asokan Brahmi script, Southern Brahmi was in use in Sri Lanka, pointed out the use of the letter “ள” (la) in the inscriptions of 2nd c.B.C. (Karunaratne 1984:32)

The term “வேளு” (velu) is found in the Brahmi inscriptions in different parts of Tamil Nadu (Mahadevan 1966: 61). They belong to the period from 3rd c.B.C. The same word is used in many places of the Sangam corpus. Its plural form “வேளிர்” (velir) also is used in many Sangam poems. So, the “வேள;” (vel) of Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions should be studied against the historical background of Sangam Age.

In the process of state formation in South India particularly in Tamil country among the local chiefs, “வேள்”(vel) and “வேளிர்”(velir) had a significant role. In Sangam literature, the occurrence of the word such as “இளங்கோவேள்” (Ilankovel), “மகாவேள்எவ்வி” (Makavelevvi), “நெடுவேள்ஆவி” (netuvelavi), “வேந்தரும்வேளிரும்” (ventarumvelirum), “இருபெரும்வேந்தரொடுவேளிர்” (iruperumventarotuveilir) explains how far the chiefs had a vital role in socio-economic conditions of the Muventar's (cera, chola & Pandiya) territories. The

important “வேளிர்” (velir) chiefs of Sangam period were “நன்னகங்கன்” (nannankankan), “கட்டி” (katti) and “பாணன்” (panan) (அகம் 44, 113, 325). It appeared that during the Sangam Age every settlement had one “வேள்” (vel) chief. The people who lived under his leadership could have been his kith and kin brought into a single clan. The places “வேளாபுரம்” (velapuram), “வேள்கலிநாடு” (velkalinadu), “வேள்நாடு” (velnadu) and “வேளுர்” (velur) of Tamil Nadu which are referred to in Sangam literature should be the territories under the control of such chiefs. Here it is to be said that Y.Subbarayalu holds a view that the territory “வேள்நாடு” (velnadu) was under the control of “வேள்” (vel).

Sangam words “தொன்முதிர் வேளிர்” (tonmutirvelir) (புறம், 201: 11-12) and “தொன்றுமுதிர்வேளிர்” (tonrumutirvelir) (புறம், 24:21) would explain that “வேளிர்” (velir) is one of the autochthonous clans of Tamil Nadu. N Subramanian opines that “வேளிர்” (velir) of Tamil Nadu were the people who migrated from Indus region about 800 B.C into South India (Subramanian 1966: 258). The Pinkala Nikantu of 11th c.A.D refers to the Chalukyas who ruled a part of Deccan about 600 years as the “வேளிர்” (velir) Tivakara Nikantu of 850 A.D. refers to the Chalukyas as “வேள்குலஞ்சர்” (velkulaaracar). S Krishnaswamy Aiyangar said that they are referred to in these ways as the “வேளிர்” (velir) who held sway in and outside Tamil Nadu also (Aiyangar 1941:11). R. Champakalakshmi who holds a view that Megalithic Culture spread into Sri Lanka mainly from Tamil Nadu, tried to interrelate the Megalithic Culture with the origin of “வேளிர்”

(velir). Taking B R W as one of the important features of Megalithic Culture of Tamil Nadu, she views the authors of this culture were the people who led their life by agriculture. She further suggests that the habitation sites of “வேளிர்” (velir) and the Megalithic sites should be studied comparatively (Champakalakshmi 1978:52). S. Seneviratne says that in most of the habitation sites of Tamil Nadu, excavations unearthed a good number of burials (Seneviratne 1993:70). In studying the herostones of Cengam and Dharmapuri areas. K. Rajan arrives at conclusion that the Megalithic herostones may have association with the origin of the வேளிர் (velir) (Rajan 1996:220) who led the pastoral life; mostly involved in war activities. The வேளிர் (Velir) who indulged in battlefields are described in the literature as ஐம்பெரும்வேளிர் (aimperumvelir) and பதினொருவேளிர் (Patinoruvilir). Akananuru speaks of Karikarcholan's war with பதினொருவேளிர் (patinoruvilir) (அகம், 36:135). So it would be incorrect to connect the agriculturists of the Megalithic culture with வேளிர் (Velir) who led the warlike. Viewing pastoral community and agricultural community as two different social groups, Romila Thapar says that both these groups had a reciprocal relationship. Here it would be right to say that வேளிர் (velir) were to protect their contemporary agriculturists who in return had to give the former the food commodities (Romila Thapar 1984:32)

There is a view that the terms வேள் (vel) and வேளிர் (velir) are referring not to the clan but are the honorific suffixes.

In Sangam literature. These terms denote not only the chiefs of வேளிர் (velir) but also some other clans such as ஆய (ay) மலையமான் (malayanman) and போசானியர் (Posaniyar), (பூங்குன்றன் 1989:220). In ancient history, in different parts of the world, the leaders of the cattle-lifting groups rose in due course to the position of the clan chiefs of the respective groups. Among such chiefs in Tamil Nadu the best one was to be honoured with the title வேள் (vel). While bringing to our notice the practice of cattle-lifting in the pastoral community of ancient Africa and that of Vedic age, Romila Thapar says that Sanskrit term राज्ञ (raja) denotes the person who was professionally a prisoner in war-time (Romila Thapar 1984:24). In Proto- Dravidic languages the word வேள்(Vel) has different shades of meaning like brightness, headship and attractiveness. Most probably the Sanskrit राज्ञा (raja) also has the same meanings. So, both of these terms can be taken to denote the leadership/leader. According to R Elmen, in the process of state formation sprang up from the ground of lineage system, the வேளிர் (velir) were in the position of exercising their power as the warrior-chiefs (Elman 1975:37). At the beginning, this term denoted the leaders of some social groups. But in course of time these leaders descendants began to claim themselves, as if they were the members of the வேள்(vel) clan. This view is explicit in Sangam the words வேள்குலம் (velkulam) and வேள்குடி (velkuti).

The word வேள் (el) occurs in an about 21 Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka. A. Velupillai says that வேள் (vel) is found in 5 more inscriptions and

it is misread as சுலு (sulu) (Velupillai 1980:12). But S Paranavithana had a view that வேள் (vel) is a derived term from a Sanskrit word வைலவா (vailava) denoting personal name (Paranavithana 1970:122). H.W Ellwala says that as this term is related with the god "Murukan" the inscriptional term வேலு (velu) and வேலுஸ (velusa) explain the practice of Murukan – cult among the Sinhalese. S K Sitrapalam views that வேள் (vel) and வேளிர் (velir) of Sangam literature and their counterparts of Sri Lankan inscriptions can be treated as the same. Further he says that the term வேள் (vel) from which derived a term வெள்ளாளர் (vellalar) later on denoted the clan (சிறீறம்பலம் 1993:546). The usage of வேள் (vel) in Sangam literature and that of Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions can be treated the same. But in Tamil Nadu there are ample evidences to say that வேள் (vel) at first denoted leader / leadership; later on the clan or lineage. No such evidences are available in Sri Lanka. The terms குல (kula) and குடி (kuti) have occurred in Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions, but not with word வேள் (vel). Mostly this word began occurring in the inscriptions often since 1st c.B.C. Later on, number of occurrences became less. But the attempt of tracing the connection between வேள் (vel) and வெள்ளாளர் (vellalar) needs some more justification. வேள் (vel) is used as prefix and suffix with the names of local chiefs in Sangam literature. Except in Amparai inscription where – in it is used as prefix, almost in all other Brahmi inscriptions it is used as suffix (Paranavithana 1970:No 647). The case of Amparai, the inscriptional term is வேளசுமண (velsumana). These two

terms have occurred jointly and separately in epigraphs and pali literary works such as Mahavamsa. Manorata-purani, Sabasavanhu, Rajavahini and others (Ellawala 1969:61,112,115), Pali literature which principally speaks of the kings, describes a few times a multifaceted role of வேளுசுமண (velusumana) in the administrative machinery. On this account, the prefix of his name would certainly be the honorific title. Further it is used in the inscription to denote different meanings – leaders, village chief, supervisor of horse, house, house head, devotee of Buddha, revenue collector and others. The பருமகவேள் (parumakavel) of Periya-Puliyankulam inscription in Northern Sri Lanka denoting a horse supervisor is to be mentioned here (Paranavitana 1970:No;335). Mahavamsa speaks of one வேளுசுமண (velusumana) who was a native of Kiri region as an expert in horse riding. Rajavahini also speaks of வேளுசுமண (velusumana) whose profession was to import the horses from foreign countries (Ellawala 1969:61,115)

Trade played a vital role in the socio economic activities of ancient Sri Lanka. The trade across South India and other countries of South Asian region was the main cause for the growth of urbanisation in Sri Lanka. In this trade the main exported commodity was the pearl; the imported item was the horse. An inscriptional term பதவேள் (patavel) of Anuradapura is surmised to denote the chief of பரதவ (paratava) clan which had an intense involvement in foreign trade. (Paranavitana 1970: No.121). This term பரதவவேள் (paratavavel) may be taken to denote the chief of the same

பரதவ (paratava) clan.

Sangam literature in many places portrays the வேள் (vel) and வேளிர (velir) the warriors. In interpreting the inscriptional terms கோடய வேள் (Kotayavel) from Kekalay. S. Paranavitana read the word கோடய (Kotaya) as கொடய (Kotaya) and traced its origin to the Sanskrit word கொஸ்டிகா (kostika) from this point, he took கொடயவேள் (kotayavel) for the chief வேலு (velu) of fort. But A Veluppilāi takes கொடய (kotaya) as a prakrit term meaning கோட்டை (fort) (Veluppilāi 1980:13) . It is said that வேளசுமண (velsumana) was the army chief of தூட்டகாமினி (tuttakamini) at the time when he waged the war against Ellalan. Before winning Ellalan. Tuttakamini conquered 32 local chiefs of the former as described in Mahavamsa. The வேள் (vel) also might have been included among these chiefs. Rajavahini narrates another story. It tells that a spy called வேளசுமண (velsumana) promised Ellalan that he would get a Sinhalese ruler called காக்கவனத்திரா (kakkavanatissa) imprisoned (Ellawala 1969:61). The description about வேள் (vel) and வேளசுமண (velsumana) in Sri Lankan sources recalls that of Sangam வேள் (vel) and வேளிர (velir) as the warriors.

On the basis of the above said accounts it would be right to say that the வேள் (vel) of Sri Lankan inscriptions stands for the title rather than denoting the personal name. Like வேள் (vel), some other words such as கமணி (kamani), கபதி (kapati), பருமக (parumaka) and others are used as prefix with சுமண (sumana) in Sri Lankan inscriptions. All these prefixes are to be

treated as the titles. Amparai inscription refers to the son of the பருமகவேள்குமண (parumakavelsumana) as பருமகவேள் (parumakavel) (Paranavitana 1970: No; 647). Here, the வேள் (vel) would certainly denote a clan. But some more evidences are necessary to prove this. As for as Tamil Nadu is concerned, வேள்(vel) chiefs emerged in the socio economic process of cattle-lifting and agricultural production. The use of வேள் (vel) from Tamil Nadu sources into Sri Lanka was possible mainly because of foreign trade. From the time of Megalithic Culture, evidences are available regarding the impressive trade between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. Those who chiefly managed such trade because of link with Tamil Country might have been given the title வேள் (vel). As the centuries rolled on, the title might have been conferred on the leaders of the social groups, local chiefs, millitary chiefs, royal officials and others. Here it is to be pointed out, as described in Mahavamasa, that சேனன் (senan) and குத்திக (kuttika) the sons of a horse trader who hailed from Tamil Nadu were the first Tamil rulers of Sri Lanka.

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