

Traces How Many Of Our Historical Values Of Sacred Temple Tanks, Water Resource Engineering Skills Of Ancient Tamils Have We Lost?

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The water reservoirs and temple tanks have a hoary past in India. The concept of water reservoirs as public utility is first seen in “Great Bath” of the Indus-Sarasvati cities of Mohenjo Daro, Harappa and Dholavira.¹ In addition to this Saint Narada advised Yudhishthira, one of the heroes of the epic age *Mahabharata*, to excavate huge water reservoirs to preserve rain water and perennial river, which was in spate thereby making agriculture an independent with sustainable water reservoirs.² In the Anusasana Parva of Mahabharata, Bhishma, the Son of Ganga Devi tells Yudhishtira, the merits of building ponds: “he whose tank is full of water in summer and is used by human beings, animals and birds to slake their thirst, acquires the merits of an *Aswamedha yaga*. While the Mahabharata emphasises the importance of the gift of water “the gift of water is superior to every other gift.”³ Thus public reservoir and temple sacred tank regarded sustainable water resources and received its importance during the epic age.

Next to the epic age, Manu imposes the death penalty on the destroyer of a dam or water tank. The *Padma Purana* explains a whole chapter for maintenance of public tank and its conservation. During the age of Mauryas, village tanks had its own significance. It is known by the fact that Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* mentions the officials to supervise and maintain freshwater sources, including tanks and reservoirs. Thus tanks and reservoirs were regarded as essential components of the

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welfare administrative and primal duty of the Enlightened Despots. Therefore these prove the existence and preservation of water tank with care by the people in Ancient India.⁴ Water provision and protection of reservoirs must be the important duty of the common people and the Government for time immemorial. Thus water, a precious liquid thanks to frequent droughts and floods is essential for life of all and it is not a luxury. The North India had perennial rivers thanks to the glaciers and melting snows of the Himalayas. In North India, the flowing rivers provided the sacred waters, whereas the South India was rain-dependant.⁵ In Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in South Indian, tanks, which regarded sacred, were excavated to provide water facility.

This paper focuses on the historicity and significance of sacred temple tank, How the rare name Kulathur came into being? What does it connote? the assimilation of religion with sacred temple tank, Establishment of the sacred temple tank, water management system, sustainable administration on water reservoirs, good old traditional maintenance, irrigation engineering and technology during the medieval age in Tamil Country. This article also turns the pages of history to see how we have lost the excellent network of sacred temple tank ponds and lakes.

The water reservoir of Tamilaham known by different Tamil names such as, *Yeri*, *Oorani*, *Kulam* and *Kuttai*.⁶ Earthen reservoirs or *yeris* were dug in villages and towns of ancient Tamilaham. These artificial water bodies were namely *yeris* or large irrigation lakes, with tall bunds or side walls above ground level. The next one was the *kuttai* or small pond, encircled by enclosures. The third one was the *kulam* or public village tank and fifth one the *Kovil kulam* or sacred temple tank with a deep pond temple tank, a deep pond protected by an enclosure or wall with flight of steps on all four sides leading to the bottom. In this juncture temple tanks came to be known and represent as the sacred rivers. For example Nataraja temple sacred tank at Chidambaram is known as *Shiva Ganga Tirtha*. Ekambareshwarar temple sacred tank at Kanchipuram is known as *Kampai Tirtha*; Varadaraja Temple at Kanchipuram is known as *Anantasaras Tirtha*; and Adi Kumbeswarar Temple at Kumbakonam is popularly known as *Mahamakam Tirtha* which, described as the southern *Prayag*,

believed to be the confluence of all the sacred rivers of India every twelve years. Besides, each sacred *Tirtha* of 108 Vaishnava *divyadeshas* has a sacred and unique name. The sacred temple tanks are also named after Lord Siva, Saivite devotees, Nandi, etc. From this it is infer that generally, the temple and the tank were constructed simultaneously, therefore these two linked in the Tamil term *kovil kulam*, meaning temple tank.⁷ At this juncture it is highly useful analyse how the name of the village Kulathur came in to being. The inscriptional sources of Tatakapurisvara temple stood as testimonials that the present name of the village Madam, invariably mentioned in majority of the epigraphical records as Kulathur. Perhaps the village after got its name Kulathur from the Tamil term Kulam (pond) which supplied drinking water, other basic needs of the human beings, animals and birds. Giving place name Like Kulathur another place got its name such as, Thiru-alli-keni tank of the sacred white lily where the water plants like the white lily were grown in the tank, of the Parthasarathy Temple, Triplicane.⁸

Here it is worthwhile to know the assimilation of sacred temple tank with religion. Water was regarded as sacred. Rivers and lakes were endowed with a sanctity that protected them from pollution and misuse. In this context nothing was excluded from the ambit of religion. Religion used to protect the freshwater sources, which was responsible for the growth of health, groves, agriculture, trees and animals. It is also believed that all ponds or tanks, the water reservoirs have a protective deity. The sacred temple tank also fulfilled three important components of pilgrimage, which were the devotees *sthaanam* holy bath of the devotee or Sprinkled the holy water on the head of the pilgrim Usually the pilgrims while entering the temple, the worshipper could bathe in the temple tank to cleanse himself of the dust and grime of travel. The sacred bath of the principal deity, the sacred bath of the *Moolavar* while conducting *abisheka* in the daily Pujas the sacred water kept from the holistic temple tank and prayers of the devotees on *moorthi*, the primal deity. In this respect each temple generally had two or more tanks. One was used for the ritual *abhishekha* of the deity and the maintenance of the *nandavanam*, the temple garden, which provided the

flowers for the temple rituals. The second one was provided water for the devotees or pilgrims to refresh themselves before entering the temple.⁹

Apart from the ritualistic service it is highly useful to mention the various usages of sacred temple tanks. The herbs used in the ritual bath (*abhishekha*) of the deity were mixed with the tank water, making the *tirtha* as sacred and adding the temple tank water as medicinal properties. The sacred tank is also useful to celebrate the annual *teppotsavam* (float festival). The bronze image of the deity is taken in procession around the temple tank, on a palanquin by the devotees. Sometimes, a pillared *mandapa*, or *neerali mandapa*,¹⁰ may be built in the tank or a wooden *mandapa* floated in the tank where the deity is placed to the chanting of *shlokas* and *nadaswaram* music. Apart from its role in the daily *abhishekha* and the *teppotsavam*, the tank plays an important role in the annual *brahmotsavam*, when the deity would come to the banks of the tank to bless the waters.¹¹

In this juncture it is worthwhile to analyse an inscription found on an open rock nearby the sacred temple tank of Tatakapurisvara temple issued during the time of Vijayanagar rule in the *Saka* year 1494 correspondent to 1415 C.E. The lithic records registers a gift of perpetual lamp and fetching water for the sacred bath on the daily *abhishekha* to the presiding deity of Tatakapurisvarar temple by one Sennaya Krishnaya, who is identified the Vijayanagar regent.¹² From this it is clear that the Vijayanagar regent had close association with Madam Tatakapurisvarar temple and patronised the temple by digging sacred temple tank popularly known Annamalaiyan Kuttai. Thus the sacred temple tank is named after Lord Siva. Moreover the epigraph also attested the water resource establishment, inadequate maintenance and sustainable water resource management system in each and every hamlets and settlements like Madam by the Vijayanagar rulers. The inscription also help us to understand the religious utilization of sacred water resources. The sacred temple tank known as Annamalayan Kuttai served as basic water needs of the temple, spiritual service like sacred bath of the presiding deity, other idols both stone and metal during daily puja *abhisekhas*.¹³

At this juncture it is quite useful to analyse why we should restore the inadequate water management system and sustainable water resources by every citizen. To answer the above the temple sacred tank in addition to spiritual service fulfilled another important social role: the maintenance of ground water levels. Seeing its efficacy, it became an essential part of Tamils life and culture. The temple tanks were a brilliant innovation to harvest and store water voluntarily, a religious duty, whereby the rulers particularly the Vijayanagar earned merit even as they contributed to society's welfare. Therefore temple sacred tanks were repaired and restored periodically by the Vijayanagar rulers. It is essential to combat the ever increasing water shortages and droughts that plague our land. The chief objectives of this paper are as follows: To desilted and maintained Temple tanks properly. The area around the tanks must be regarded as heritage precincts and construction of houses without sloping roofs or cement and tar roads must be banned. To repaired and maintained regularly the inlet and outlet channels. To establish Gardens and public recreation spaces in and around temple tanks to inspire and force people to keep the sacred tank clean. To handed over the maintenance to local people's committees and the younger generation was should know the values of outage old water management.

Besides, some of the temple tanks are bare earthen tanks. There are provisions for water inlets and outlets for the overflow. Some tanks have underground springs. Here it is also essential to analyse what type of the traditional techniques adopted by our ancestors. Apart from the excavation and regular maintenance, the Pallavas used an excellent technique with the utilization of natural resources for the establishment of tank. The Natural resources like hills, mountainous slops, high level ground area nearer the temple were used as natural bunds and cleverly used the high ground level land for the establishment of the water reservoir to store the water. So that nothing went to waste. From this it is points out that the Pallavas, the Cholas built huge tanks between high level land for two reasons namely, one is rain water flowing down the slopes would fill them automatically with in high level tank from two sides slopes and the another one is that there was no need to build bunds.¹⁴

Apart from the establishment of sacred tank and regular maintenance, the Pallava and the Cholas monarchs used another excellent technology with the utilization of artificial canals for the filling of water resources by interconnecting from one to another in a continuous lineage. The public *yeris* and public ponds were interconnected with channels that took the overflow of one to another. Thus the interconnections with canals were used cleverly for control overflow and devastation caused by the excess water resources to the nearby settlements and villages. From this it is surmise that the Pallavas, the Cholas and the Vijayanagar through their technological advancement on storage the excess water resources and interconnected one to another water reservoirs which was an excellent traditional water storage technology of our ancestors.¹⁵ Between one to another through proper canals exemplifies their technology advancement and irrigation engineering in two benefits namely, one is the excess rain water or overflowing water saved in another water reservoirs to fulfil their additional needs both irrigation and public utility. The second one is that there was no devastation occurred nearby settlements and flood.¹⁶

The Tatakapurisvara temple epigraph and other inscriptions show that the Tamils had knowledge water reservoir establishment, in adequate maintenance, high sense of technology and special skill to interconnect water reservoirs. The epigraphic sources also state that during the medieval age, when the nearby river was in spate, in order to save the village and settlements of the people the Tamils interconnected with the lake, village tank and temple tank. By this interconnection engineering on the water reservoirs and water flow they could save overflow water and utilised the excess water resources for their perennial needs including irrigating of their lands. It shows their technologically sound knowledge on water management, water preservation in and reservoirs technological advancement on irrigation engineering skills.¹⁷

In this connection it is most urgent to create awareness among the youngsters to understand how we have lost the excellent network of lakes, ponds, including temple tank? How many of our historical values on irrigation engineering have we lost? The terracotta channels through which water was taken from Thanjavur

Sivaganga kulam to other ponds, and which helped to recharge wells in Thanjavur, have been blocked by those who built houses on the land under which the terracotta canals passed.¹⁸ The Sevvappa Nayaka lake, which was in existence until about 50 years ago, is now a residential colony. Parts of the Samudram lake in Thanjavur have been encroached upon. The Tribhuvana Mahadevi lake, built by Rajendra I Chola, which irrigated 52 villages, and the Siva temple in the middle of the lake have disappeared.¹⁹ At present in stark contrast, the village public pond has shrunk to a small pool of green slime, bushes of vegetations and has become a receptacle for trash. This paper will make use of the village voluntaries to take care to restore the village Ponds and temple tanks. The Pond is choked with plastic bags, milk sachets, and household waste now.²⁰ It has become a cesspool of *juliflora* plants and sewage. However, over time, the pond spread over a vast area of land was abandoned, with a part being encroached upon and another part used for dumping garbage by the local misusers. To create awareness and values on construction of a tank is an act of great merit, for provision of water is the greatest of all *danams* (gifts).²¹ It is also one of the *saptasantanam* or seven kinds of wealth. Thus it is an act of merit for excavates tanks and present administrators to desilt or re-recover the endowment lands for the inadequate maintenance and sustainable water reservoirs including temple tanks.

The concluding part of this paper states that no matter how many resources we have, lost unless we learn to maintain and use them properly we won't benefit by them. Tatakapurisvara temple tank like Maadakulam near Madurai as these are now standing examples of neglected resources that might have kept the settlements and lands prosperous. By discarding of our old traditions, and destroying age old water management systems that sustained our traditional Tamil society which made life enduring we have lost. Today the existing ancient ponds and other reservoirs have shrunk to small pools of green slime. Thus, Madam temple tank which was once had brimming water, lost its sheen and people over time had forgotten the pond. However, the youth from the village Madam and nearby villages, should come up and learn the historical importance of the temple tank and its perennial usages by the village elders

as well as to understand the historical significance of inscriptional primary sources which reveals the values of reservoirs engineering and inadequate maintenance of the Madam Tatakapurisvarar temple tank and its premise. The Youth would come up to charted fresh plans to restore the pond and water reservoirs. Thus the establishment of temple sacred tank, its inadequate maintenance and sustainable water management teach us a concrete lesson to our present generation. Our forefathers, patrons like Vijayanagar rulers and village administration left valuable knowledge on water resource management and public responsibility on sustainable water reservoirs.

History shows that our ancestors allowed public-interest to take precedence over the interests of society at large. Our ancestors also left behind for us an excellent network of lakes and ponds, many portion of which, we have lost, through apathy and greed. Isn't it time for us to take stock of our losses and resort to remedial measures? Otherwise, we will have very little to leave behind for posterity. Raising funds for the revival of the water body through crowd funding, they then desilted the entire portion of the pond and even made efforts to utilise it for the drinking water purposes.

In fine the researcher has given some suggestions. As most of the temples belong to the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (HR&CE) Board of the Government of Tamilnadu, should come forward and entrust the work with the support of local youths to maintain and renovate tanks. Unfortunately, this has not been done so far regularly or till recently. No renovation or desilting can be taken up by local people or NGOs without the department's permission and co-operation. Urban tanks are even worse off, becoming a receptacle for the garbage and sewage of surroundings. Thus the youth of the villagers and HR&CE should do the needful. In our present political system it is fairly liberal and it is possible to enforce laws.

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