

Chapter 1

Antecedents of the State (Polity) Formation in Early South India*

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The chapter is an outline of the historical antecedents of the state (polity) formation in the Tamil macro region with an outline of contemporary Deccan as a point of reference. A discussion of polity in the historiography of peninsular India hardly involved any focus on structure, process, and dynamics, precluding the possibility of conceptualizing the formation of the state, which is not external. Inevitably, *sui generis*, the state gets neither diffused nor transplanted, turning the notion of secondary state formation to a misnomer.¹ It may be noted that the state comes into being in a society of asymmetrical relations, the dominance of which is contested by chieftains. It is this contest that de-personalizes and institutes the state. Writing and documentation will become essential or will automatically come up as a primary instrument of the state. As a juridico-political apparatus the state is possible in a society of document-based chieftains. All this has made socio-economic analysis a necessary pre-condition for understanding the nature of political formations in the past and determining whether they signify the state or its antecedent. Analysis of historical socio-economic processes is best done within the theoretical framework of social formation.² Therefore, the paper at first seeks to briefly characterize the socio-economic processes in the early Deccan as to understand the nature of the Andhra/Sātavāhana political formations. Then it goes about examining the early historical

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¹ See the discussion in Krader 1968: 66-71. Service 1975: 37-48. Researches in state formation received wider attention ever since the publication of Claessen and Skalnik 1978. See the discussion of the concept of secondary state formation in Senevaratne 1980-1981: 54. For a deeper analysis of the historical process of the state formation in the Gangetic region, see Thapar 1984.

² The concept of Social Formation is defined in Marx 1953: 104. See the relevant extracts in Hobsbawm 1964: 12; Hindess and Hirst 1977: 10-11; Cohen 1978: 7; Anderson 1983: 14. See the discussion in Elster 1985: 1-41; Wright et al. 1992: 62-67. For the applied instance of the concept, see Gurukkal 2009.

social formation of the Tamil macro region in some detail, which include political formations represented by the three principal chiefly lineages (*mūvēntar*), namely the Cēra, Pāṇḍya and Cōḷa, the hill chieftains (*vēḷir*), and the village chieftains (*ūr-kiḷār* or *ūr-mannar*).

1. Historiographic Preliminaries

Discussions of polity in the historiography of peninsular India have largely been centred on the rise and fall of dynasties rather than on the formation of political structures and power relations. Having made little difference between lineages and dynasties or chieftains and kings, most historians have treated the Andhra/Sātavāhana as an important dynasty of the immediate post-Mauryan India (first century BCE and third century CE) in the light of their mention in the Purāṇic genealogy under the label of the Andhra kings, the numismatic evidence, certain archaeological monuments and a few epigraphs [Mirashi 1981]. Similarly, the Cēra, Pāṇḍya and Cōḷa dynasties of about the same period, celebrated in the Tamil heroic poems, have been taken for dynasties and kings by most historians.³ Most historians have used the terms ‘kingdom’ and ‘empire’ rather than ‘state’ in their discussions of polity, largely with the notion of one differing from the other in relation to the extent of territory, power, and authority. At the same time they have not used the term ‘chiefdom’ much, and always served the purpose by coining the terms ‘province’ or ‘locality’. The term ‘chief’ in their discussion appears generally with the prefix ‘feudatory’ to denote him a subordinate under the king, rather than an relatively autonomous ruler. Nevertheless, a king is always mentioned as the rightful ruler of an autonomous territory, namely the kingdom, rather than a subordinate at the mercy of the emperor. With the result, the term ‘empire’, which denoted a higher form only in scale has been widely applied to the kingdom as well. Differences discernible between the chiefdom and the kingdom or between the kingdom and the empire in terms of the structure, function and other attributes, are theoretically given constructs of our times, but not part of contemporary experience.⁴ But theoretical constructs are inevitable for

³ Tamil heroic literature refers to what is popularly known as the corpus of Sangam literature. The corpus includes in its most archaic stratum some of the anthologies grouped under *Eṭṭuttokai* (The Eight Anthologies) and *Pattuppāṭṭu* (The Ten Idylls) roughly belonging to the second century BCE and third century CE. U.V. Swamynatha Iyer has edited and published the texts of idylls and anthologies belonging to the Tamil heroic tradition, during 1955-1957. Also see Kailasapathy 1968; Hart 1979.

⁴ Chanakya was perhaps first to present an analytical abstraction of the state attributes in the context of traditional India. He abstracts the attributes as *Saptāṅga*: *Swāmi*, *Amātya*, *Janapada*, *Durga*, *Kōsa*, *Daṇḍa* and *Mitra*. See discussion in Sharma 1996: 31-48. Modern analysis has generated an impressive body of theoretical literature ever since the publication of Claessen

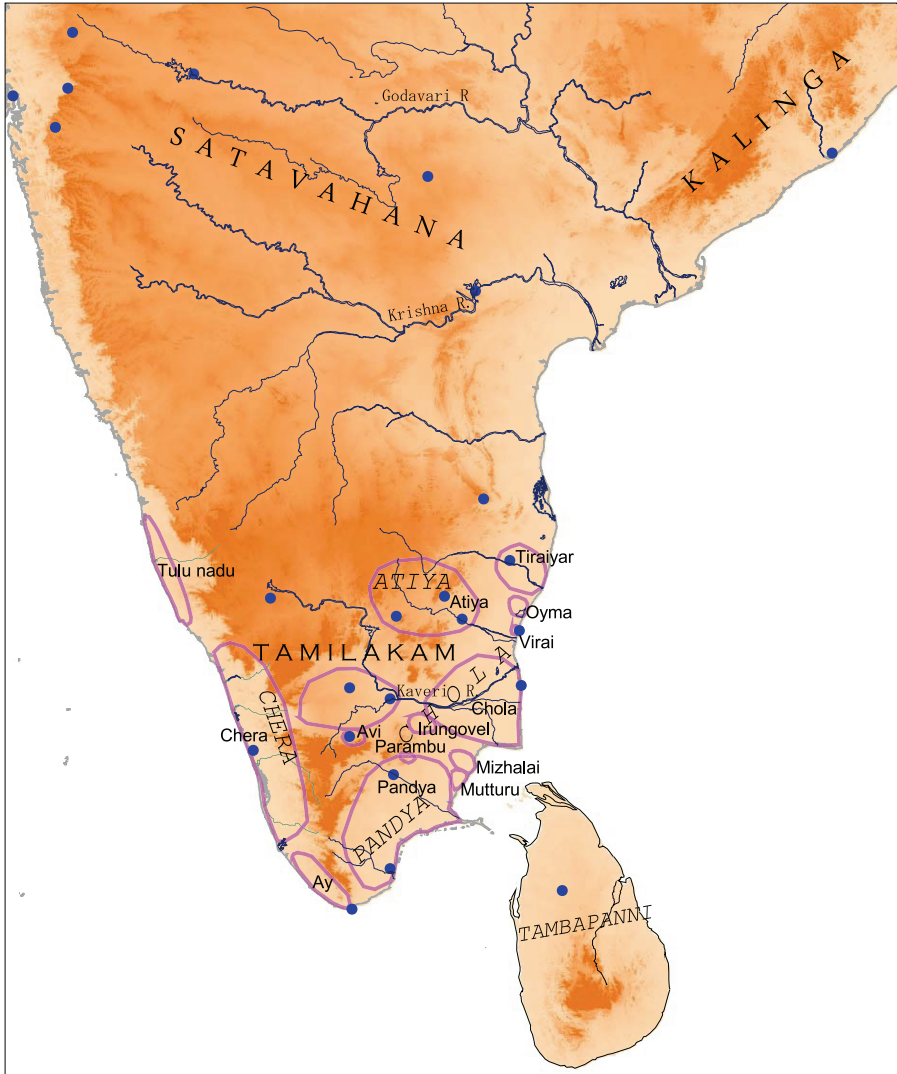


Fig. 1.1: Map of Chieftainships in Peninsular India

comprehending the formations, processes and internal dynamic, which constitutes the object of historical study.

2. The Deccan Region

Archaeological remains on the surface and out of excavations show a continuous history of human settlements in different parts of the Deccan region from the turn of the first millennium BCE, onwards, as adapted to the multiple landscape ecosystems through an array of unevenly evolving techno-economic strategies of subsistence and survival [Sankalia and Deo 1955; Sankalia, Subbarao and Deo 1958; Dhavalikar 1988; Sastry 1983; Pisipaty 2010]. It was an ensemble structured by the dominance of the agro-pastoral culture that had a long continuity, of course with certain changes. Agriculture included both shifting as well as sedentary with the latter mostly centred on arid highland-crops like millets and limitedly on fertile lowland-crops like rice, wheat and sugar cane. The socio-economic processes of the region during the immediate post-Mauryan period (first century BCE) were primarily a continuation of the interactive co-existence amongst these unevenly evolved forms of subsistence, depended on various levels of the metal technology of iron and high-tin bronze with some sort of specialization in crafts production and exchange, but largely within the clan-kin nexus.⁵

The larger section of the population in the region must have belonged to the settlements along the black-soil tracts of the Ghats and upper reaches of the rivers, suitable for agro-pastoral means of subsistence and it consisted of descent groups and their chiefs of clan-kin ties. Some of them were inhabitants of small fertile pockets of fields around watersheds, living on wet-rice agriculture. It is natural that kinship would be the basis of productive relations among descent groups. Networking across these settlements of the hill tracks rich in forest goods, mineral resources, crafts production, dry-land crops like millet, pastoral goods and rice, there were trade routes frequented by long distance itinerant merchants. Trade routes from the north, north-west and east passed through these habitation areas, collecting the local products in exchange of non-local goods. The local goods largely consisted of forest goods, metal and mineral resources, gems, textile and craft-goods while the non-local involved mainly spices meant for overseas exchange.

Trade and trade-routes had enabled circuit of merchants, monks, mendicants and others, while their convergence at areas of settlements in its turn had led to the rise of monasteries and growth of urban centres. Human settlements were essential for the sustenance of monks, monastic establishments, and their maintainers. While

and Skalnik 1978. See Claessen, Hegesteijn and van de Velde 2008: 1-268.

⁵ For the standard characterization, see Parasher-Sen 1993.

the *upāsakas* in the settlements supported small caves in their vicinity, the big merchants, prominent households and chieftains endowed bigger establishments. There has always been exaggeration about the agrarian surplus in the settlements and over-generalization about its connection to trade, monastic establishments, urban development and state formation with differences in the precedence of one or the other over the rest.⁶ There are remnants of several Buddhist monuments at different points along the Ghats and the upper reaches of the Godavari-Krishna rivers as well as their deltas and along the northern Andhra coast.⁷ A few of them date back to the Mauryan period while most of them belong to the Sātavāhana-Ikṣvāku periods (first century BCE–fifth century CE). A few Buddhist monuments were probably close to a marketing centre or they were small townships themselves, as exemplified by Prathishtana (Paithan) on the Godavari and Amarāvati and Nāgārjunakoṇḍa on the Krishna. Ports like Bharukaccha, Sopara and Kaleina were seasonally active points of exchange where long-distance merchants, craftsmen and providers of goods and services converged in connection with the Roman trade. Extensive inland trade networks presupposing frequent circuit of itinerant merchants and availability of coins both local and non-local in plenty presupposing monetized transactions, jointly indicate a wide zone of economic activities and exchanges [Gupta 1972: 41-62; Mirashi 1972: 205-212; Rao 1961; D.R. Reddy and P.S. Reddy 1983: 70-77; D.R. Reddy and P.S. Reddy 1985; Mangalam 1999: 360-390].⁸

Households of big merchants and local personages of some authority, like the Rāthikas, Bhōjas and Peṭenikas, their warriors and the *dāsa-bhṛtaka*-s might have constituted the population in the strategic areas of trade and markets. There were several Brahmana households too in the plains mostly around the residences of chieftains who could be provided with services of preceptors and Vedic priests. There were specialized merchants like *dhānikas* (corn dealers), *gandhikas* (perfume dealers), *mālākāras* (florists) *suvarṇakāras* (gold dealers), *odayantrikas* (irrigation device dealers) and so on figuring in the cave inscriptions. These dealers, mostly organized into *nigamams* (corporation) seem to be itinerants of brief sojourns at points of exchange and hence not integral to the local system of social relations, which was differentiated in terms of status and ranks but yet to be class-structured. The chiefly households do not seem to have any intermediaries in land placed below them, presupposing that their land control was hardly beyond what could be

⁶ For an exaggeration of the material culture, nature and surplus potential of local settlements as well as for a criticism against generalizations about the connections amongst the various phenomena, see discussion in Morrison 1995: 203-221.

⁷ See, Burgess 1883. For a comprehensive account of sites, see Kail 1975; Sarma 1988; Mitra 1980: 155-157. For Andhra an exhaustive chronological list of Buddhist and other religious sites, see Prasad 2008: 287-308.

⁸ For a discussion of the nature of urban settlements, see Parasher-Sen 1999: 159-189. For a general appreciation of the situation, see Ray 1986.

cultivated by their *dāsa-bhṛtaka* workforce. They seem to have had no systematic relations of appropriation with, rather than predatory control over, the settlements of descent groups, either.

3. Sātavāhana Polity

This is a situation precluding the existence of a class society structured by the dominance of a ruling aristocracy, institutionalized into a system of governance based on periodic exaction of productive surplus from the region. The situation is evidently that of the pre-state, best represented universally by the tribal chiefdoms of unilineal descent, which vary in their organizational pattern of power relations across tribes, clans and lineages.⁹ Although existence of the state is unlikely in such a situation, the Sātavāhana political formation has been widely recognized as a metropolitan state in Indian historiography. Sātavāhanas appear to have been a chiefly lineage with Brahmanic pretensions in the central Deccan, wielding control over the southern trade route as its lord (*Dakṣiṇāpatha-pati*) but without any consolidated political authority, probably till the ascendancy of Gautamīputra Sātakaṛṇi who could transcend the *gōtra* nexus and assert as a king.¹⁰ An inscription in the Nasik Cave records his land grant to the monastery at the Trirasmī hill, founded by his mother Gautamī, indicative of a system of archiving charities of political significance.¹¹ Another inscription (No.18) in the cave, which contains Gautamī's praise of her son Sātakaṛṇi includes 'the judicious spending of the rightfully exacted tax' (...*dharmōpajita karavinīyōga karasa* ...) as one of his glorious attributes. This is a pointer to the existence of taxation of a formal nature for meeting the cost of governance, one of the most crucial features of the state. In the same cave, an inscription (No.13) of the same king, registers a royal order issued by word of mouth at the site requiring its intimation to Amātya Sāmaka of Govardhana. It indicates a rudimentary bureaucratic apparatus and document-based governance, yet another vital feature of the state, to have evolved by the time. There are inscriptional references to Sātakaṛṇi and his successors paying attention to the maintenance of the *varṇa* system, probably a need in the wake of *varṇasamkara* and the emergence of *sankīrṇajāti*. May be, it is a sign of political overseeing of the stabilization of caste-based social order. It appears to be a phase witnessing dissolution of the kinship base of productive relations into class base as reinforced

⁹ See discussion in Fried 1967: 236-241; Service 1975: 14-16. For details of the tribal polity, see Sahlin 1968: 22-25. See variations in tribal polity discussed in the introduction to Middleton and Tait 1970: 1-32.

¹⁰ See the brief but a clinching discussion in Chattopadhyaya 1987: 727-735. This has been reproduced in Chattopadhyaya 2003: 39-47. For a view almost the same but arrived at differently to this, see Subbarayalu: 2012.

¹¹ See Cave inscription 11, L.3-5 in Mirashi 1981: 170.

in the fetters of caste hierarchy.¹² Control of trade routes and trade centres was the primary source of the Sātavāhana state as the title *Dakṣiṇāpathīsvara* (the divine lord of the southern trade routes) would show. We do not see them taking initiative in the expansion of the wet-zone agriculture and the alluvial deltas of the major rivers in their kingdom were not brought under plough during their reign, obviously due to the insufficiency of population pressure and the lack of non-kin labour in productive relations. The formation of an integrated society, predominantly class-structured became complete only two or three centuries later when the deltas were converted into extensive fields of paddy, wheat and sugar, which become a veritable source of revenue for the constitution of the state as a full-fledged system.

4. The Kalinga Chiefdom

The situation in the Kalinga region was more or less the same, with agro-pastoral settlements of the arid highlands having precedence over those in the plains engaged in wet-rice agriculture that was significantly expanding. It was predominantly tribal despite its long tradition of cultural sharing with the Gangetic region and subsequent large-scale marches of people from there with the Mauryan techno-economic culture of agriculture and trade after Asoka's conquest of the region. Kalinga chiefdom restored its autonomy soon after the fall of the Mauryas and became well established under the Mahāmēghavāhana chieftains. Trade networks across settlements in the plains as well as in the metal and mineral-rich hillocks developed in the days of the Mauryas, expanded further providing a strong resource for the chiefdom. Khāravēla of c. 50 BCE is the best known chief of the Mahāmēghavāhana lineage, who in his Hathigumpha inscription qualifies himself 'Kalingādhipati' and 'Cakradhara'. The lineage had control over Kalinga and Mahishaka up to the first century CE. Socio-economic processes of the region were the same as those of the upper reaches of the Godavari with little scope for large-scale transformation of descent groups into class structured society and state formation that corresponded to organized agrarian expansion after three centuries.

5. The Tamilakam

Let us now examine the social formation of Tamilakam (the region between Venkatadri and Kanyakumari) for understanding features and dynamics of political formations represented by the pre-Pallavan Cēras, Pāṇḍyas and Cōlas and seeing

¹² This stage has been described as 'the duality' wherein the pre-state features co-existed with certain new ones in the gradual process of development. See Service 1975: 20.

whether they were states or their antecedents. Our knowledge about the pre-Pallavan social formation of Tamilakam is almost entirely based on the Tamil heroic literature [Gurukkal 1989]. Literary compositions, Tamil Brāhmī label inscriptions, and foreign notices indicate that the features, structures, processes, and dynamic of contemporary polity were that of chiefdoms.¹³ The archaeology of these processes takes us back in time to the centuries of expansion of the Iron Age descent communities.¹⁴ A later phase of the process, assignable to the period between the closing centuries of the first millennium BCE and the first quarter of the first millennium CE, is signified in the label inscriptions, Graeco-Roman accounts, and heroic poems. The temporal span of archaeological relics overlaps the period. It is evident from the heroic poems that they were composed after the headmen of descent communities had grown into chiefs who possessed political power that had evolved from then. There are different levels of chiefly status represented in the poems that contain clues to the pattern of distribution of power, from the simple to the complex, along the small and big descent communities. The heroic poems unveil an active scenario of co-existence and interaction of these unevenly evolved chiefly systems that can be broadly classified into three: the *Kiḷār*, *Vēḷir*, and *Vēntar*.

5.1. *The Kiḷār or Village Chieftain*

Kiḷār is the primary category of chiefship figuring in the poems as the *Ūr-kiḷār* or *Ūr-mannar* who were generally lowland chiefs of small settlements, mostly in *vanpulam*, the dry-land zone [PN 177, 180, 181]. A poem praises the *Kiḷār* of Irntur, a settlement of *vanpulam* with marginal resources, depending primarily on plunder raids, as the enemy of hunger who would summon his blacksmith on seeing a hungry bard and order a new lance to arm him for a raid to appease the bard's hunger [PN 180]. The *Kiḷār* chiefs were mostly hunter chiefs either of the *vētar* or *kuṟavar* descent communities, although some had sway over agrarian tracts and were more resourceful [PN 176, 376, 381-388]. All had to participate in the predatory campaigns of the bigger chiefs and fight for them, while a few of them had also to sing in praise of them. Some of them were designated as *ēnāti* (a corrupt form of *sēnāpati*) of the highest category of chiefs (*Vēntar*).

¹³ Label inscriptions consist of the Tamil brahmi labels belonging to c. third century BCE to fourth century CE. For texts of and detailed comments on the inscriptions see, Mahadevan 2003: 60-65.

¹⁴ The foreign notices comprise mainly the Graeco-Roman writings. For relevant excerpts, see Sastri 1972.

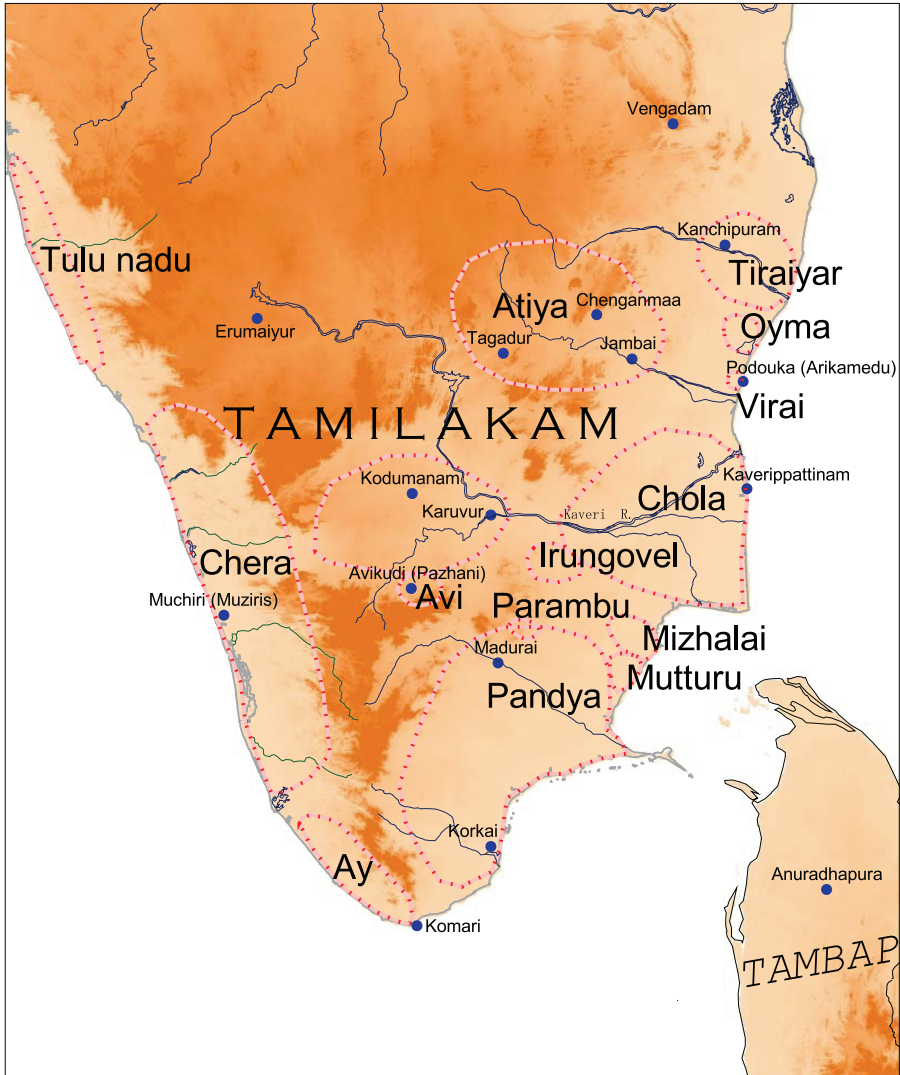


Fig. 1.2: Map of Chieftainships in Tamilakam

5.2. *The Vēḷir or the Hill Chieftain*

The level of power represented by the *Vēḷir* seems to be the most archaic and lineage-conscious. A hill chief called Irunko-*vēḷ*, one of the traditional five *vēḷ*-s, is mentioned in a poem as *vēṭarkōmān*, the chief of *vēṭar*, who belonged to a long line of 49 generations of chiefs [PN 201, 202]. The poems show that the *Vēḷir* chieftains, heading the descent communities called *vēṭar*, *iṭaiyar*, and *kuṟavar*, held sway over the forested hills of the *kuṟinji* and the *mullai* tracts of pastoral forest hills. Venkaṭamalai, Kaṅṭīramalai, Kollimalai, Mutiramalai, Kutiramalai, Paṟmpumalai, Potiyilmalai, Pāyarmalai, Ēḷilmalai, and Nānjilmalai are the famous millet-rich hill chiefdoms celebrated in the poems [PN 143, 168]. Ēḷilmalai was the most prominent hill chiefdom of Kerala and the lineage of Nannan, the hunter chief of *vēṭar* (*vēṭarkōmān*) was related to that of the chiefs of Kaṅṭīramalai. Another chiefdom closely linked to the southern end of Kerala was Potiyilmalai. Pāri, the chief of Paṟampumalai; Ōri, the chief of Kollimalai, Kāri who killed Ōri and became the chief of his hill, Eḷini, the chief of Kutirmalai and Pēkan, the chief of Vanmalai, and Kumaṇan, the chief of Mutiramalai are the most celebrated hunter chiefs of the *vēṭar* or *kuṟavar* communities [PN 158]. Sometimes the hill chiefs are called *vaḷḷuvar*. This would suggest that the term *vēḷ* derives from *vet*, meaning hunter. However, all the *Vēḷir* were not hill chiefs: for instance, *Eḷini* the chief of Veṭṭāru, was a *vēḷ* in control of agrarian lowland.

They had to resort to plunder raids too for compensating their economic deficit and they seem to have maintained predatory control over the agrarian zones in their proximity [PN 110, 168]. Some of them seem to have exchanged forest goods to procure prestige goods like gold coins, precious stones, and horses, which the poems mention as *yāṇar* (new resources). The hill of Irunko-*Vēḷ* is praised in a poem as gold-yielding [PN 202], implying its richness in the forest resources like ivory, monkeys, animal skins, and sandalwood, which brought gold in exchange, obviously Roman coins. Paṟampumalai is called *yāṇaraṟa aviyan malai*, the hill with the potential of new resources [PN 116]. Piṭṭan *korran* of Mutiramalai is called *kaṭumān korran*, the possessor of horses. Chieftains with control over such hills of rare resource potential and possessing prestige objects had a higher status and ranking. Some of them had control over agrarian tracts too as exemplified by the *Ay* chief who had owned the rich hillock, fertile plain, horses and chariots. His house was called *koil* (palace) and its surroundings a *nakar* (town), suggestive of the higher status. Nevertheless, the range of redistributive relationship of a hill chief was limited, though a few bards from distant places also met him occasionally. His predatory range was small too, enabling only small-scale raids. With no relations transcending kinship in the system of production and circulation, the political power of this category of chiefship remained subsumed within the kinship system.

5.3. The *Vēntar* Chieftain

The next category of political power is that of the *Vēntar* represented by the three major chiefly lineages (*mūvēntar* or *mūvar*) namely, the Cēras, Pāṇḍyas, and Cōlas. They had their core areas in Karur, Madurai, and Uṛaiyur, respectively and the peripheral strategic points near the ports of Muciri, Korkai, and Puhar, respectively. The Cēras held sway over the *kuṛinji* dominated zones of the Western Ghats towards the sea, the Pāṇḍyas, the *mullai*, *pālai*, *neital* dominated zones in the south central region of Tamilakam, and the Cōlas, the *marutam* dominated Kaveri region. There was no notion of precisely demarcated territory and poems would fix Himalayas as the northern boundary of each *Vēntan* whose control beyond the core where it waned and constantly fluctuated had to be frequently refreshed through predatory campaigns.

The Cēras are referred to in the poems as *kānaka-nāṭan* (the chief of the forested *nāṭu*) or *malaiyan* (the chief of *malai* or hill) which is suggestive of their ecological region. A poet praising *Cēramān Kōtai Mārpan*, expresses confusion about how the chief should really be addressed [PN 49]. The poet asks whether the chief could be called *nātan* as he had *marutam* lands or *ūran* as he had *kuṛinji* lands, or *cērpan* as he had coastal tracts. This would suggest that the Cēra region, their resource base, was a mixture of diverse ecological zones with the predominance of hills and forests, with forest wealth as the main resource. A poem incidentally refers to the hill products (*malaittārm*) and sea products (*kaṭarrāram*) of Cēran Cenkuṭṭuvan and the gold that reached ashore by boats [PN 343]. The Pāṇḍyas also had a mixed ecological region dominated by pastoral and coastal tracts. A Pāṇḍyan chieftain calls himself the head of the land of numerous new resources, *yānar maiyar koman* [PN 71]. The Cōla who is well known as *kāviri kiḷavan* in the poems, had his land in the Kaveri delta, rich in paddy and sugarcane [PN 61].

How did the *Vēntar* category of chieftains appropriate the resources is the most pertinent question here. Their core areas were not bigger than an *Ūr* and the surrounding areas were held by numerous other chiefs. It is implicit that their incipient mechanism of appropriation was predatory too. There are indications in the poems to the expansion of the predatory control beyond their original *Ūr* (*mutūr*) obviously through the process of subjugation [PN 54]. A poem shows Cēramān Kuṭṭuvan Kōta, sitting as the *uṭaiyōr* (lord) of a *mutūr* in the place of its original chief, probably suggesting subjugation. The subjugation process seems to have involved three different methods: subordination with tributary obligations, expulsion, and marital alliances. There are many references in the poems to all these methods of enlarging the domain of the *Vēntar*. The chiefs of Nānjilmalai, Pāyarmalai and Veṭṭāru were Cēra *Vēntan*'s subordinates with the obligation to fight in times of raid [PN 139]. A few poems praise the chiefs, Tirukuttuvan, Tirukkilli, and Tirukkannan

as the *ēnāti* of the Cēra [PN 167, 174, 394]. Similarly, Paṅṅan, the *kiḷān* of Cīrukuṭi and Aruvantai, the *kiḷān* of Ampar were Cēra subordinates with tributary and military obligations. Nākan, the *kiḷavan* of Nalai and Nampi Neṅunceliyan are mentioned as Pāṇḍya subordinates with obligations of a warrior [PN 179, 239]. Sometimes chiefs in the fringes were subordinated by two *Vēntar* chiefs, letting the obligation shift from one to the other [PN 380]. In addition to such subordinates, there were many village chiefs called *cīṅūr-mannar*, mostly, *maṛava* headmen, who functioned as the warrior headmen of the *Vēntar*. The *Vēntar* sometimes made them village chiefs (*Ūr-mannar*) in lieu of the latter's obligatory service (*viṭutoḷil*) in the predatory campaign. This seems to have enabled the *maṛava* headmen to gain predatory control over *Ūrs* [PN 285, 287]. Several poems are in praise of such warrior-chiefs who were ready to rush to their *Vēntar* in times of emergency and die fighting for him. It appears that in the expanded area, control was maintained by stationing the kinsmen of the *Vēntar* at different points for collateral management of resources as necessitated by the limitations of contemporary transport and communication facilities. The poems show that the people in the subjugated areas could remain fearless only by parting with the *Vēntar* a share of their resources, in the form of *tīrai* or *koḷ* (tributes) in kind [PN 51, 387]. Often the *Vēntar* had to raid the settlements to exact *tīrai*, for the bigger chieftains always preferred to resist, rather than volunteering to pay tributes.

The poems address *Vēntar* as *kāvalar* (protector) of the *kuṭimākka*, the settlers. Pāṇḍya Neṅunceliyan refers to his *kuṭimākkaḷ* as *en niḷal vāḷnar* (those living under my shade). This would presuppose the exaction of some goods in return from the *kuṭimākkaḷ* for the protection offered to them. In the case of the Cōḷa, it is clear that the *Vēntar* used to exact *puravu* (paddy) from the *kuṭimākkaḷ* [PN 75]. All the three *Vēntar* are referred to in the poems with the term *īraivan*, meaning 'he who exacts', although there is no clear evidence for periodic exaction in fixed measure or quantity by any of them. Therefore, it seems that the *Vēntar* had exacted their share of resources through predatory operations and voluntary offerings. Poems of the *ceviyarivūruturai* and *porunmoḷikāncitturai* advise the *Vēntar* how to protect the settlements and maintain them productive, and how to appropriate their surplus in a sustainable manner. They ask the chieftains not to behave like an elephant in the crop-field, destroying far more than what it eats, but to follow the way of the bee who sucks honey without harming the flower. These are poems by the *pulavar* (scholarly bards), mostly *vaṭamar* (poets from the north) who have known the instituted modes of periodic exaction in developed kingdoms elsewhere. The returns from exchange relations must have enabled the *Vēntar* to possess gold and other prestige items. However, it is not clear how they were involved in the process of exchange and how they exacted benefit out of it.

The poems show that the major activity of the *Vēntar*, like the *Vēḷir*, was accumulation of resources and their redistribution, following the determinate pattern

of community relationships. Plunder was indispensable for them too since their redistributive network was much more elaborate and complex than what they could have afforded with their actual resources. They had a large body of dependents such as their kinsmen (*kiḷainjar*), scholarly bards (*pulavar*), warrior chiefs (*maravar*, *kilār*, and *mannar*), warriors (*maṟavar*), bards (*pānar* and *poruṇar*), and magico-religious functionaries. The poetic flower symbolism of *vetci* (cattle raid), *karantai* (cattle recovery), *vanji* (chieftain's raid), *kānji* (chieftain's resistance of a raid), and *tumpai* (preparation for raid) show how institutionalized and common the plunder was. There is no evidence for the *Vēntar* maintaining a ready troop of warriors like a standing army. A poem refers to the *maravar* of Cōla Nalankilli as *pataimakkal*, meaning fighters [PN 25]. There is no evidence for a systematically organized militia under the *Vēntar* though the term *ēnāti* (*sēnāpati*) occurs in connection with the titles of a few headmen, as noted earlier. However, the chieftains had only a set of people belonging to the fighter clan with kinship ties who could be mobilized instantaneously by the beating of a battle drum. The need for frequent redistribution and the strain of raids should have acted as a compulsion on the *Vēntar* to intensify production, but it appears from the pieces of advice in the poems exhorting the chieftains to show more care and attention to agriculture, that they were not productively inclined. It is evident that ideas glorifying plunder and redistribution were governing their actions. Karikāla Cōla causing the anicut built on the Kaveri is indeed an indication of the chieftains' initiative in irrigation, but a rare instance.

6. The *Vēntar* Level Political Structure

The structure of the *Vēntar* level of political power was relatively complex since its redistributive social relationship was elaborate. It involved some kind of a simple hierarchy from *Vēntar* to the *kutimākkal*, with *kilār* or *mannar* as intermediaries, but cutting across kinship and distancing the *Vēntar* from the *kutimākkal*. However, during the pre-raid or post-raid feasting (*untāttu*) the *Vēntar* did drink and dine with the mercenaries (*maravar*) at his residence. A complex redistributive political economy based on raids precludes the formation of a structured polity with defined positions and functions: the only institutions of some political character mentioned in the poems is *avaiyam* (*sabha*) which seems to have functioned as an assisting body of *Vēntar*. The members of this body seem to have been mainly the warrior chiefs and the *pulavar* (the scholarly bards). However, the image of a king was quite well-known to the bards who eulogized the *mūvēntar* as crowned kings, albeit without any correspondence to reality. However, even the *pulavar* do not seem to be glorifying the *Vēntar* as accomplished rulers with the *saptāṅga* attributes.

The Cēras are the only line of chieftains bestowed with a collection of eulogizing

songs, *Patirruppattu*, solely dedicated to them, indicative of their prominence.¹⁵ They contain invaluable clues to the structure of political power, nature of authority, and sources of legitimacy. Many of the features that the anthology attributes to the Cēras are applicable to the other *Vēntar* also. Like others, the Cēras are praised as performers of *velvi* (Vedic sacrifices), devotees of *Korravai*, the war goddess, and worshippers of Murukan. However, unlike the case of the other two of the *mūvēntar*, the poems equate the Cēras with the Vedic gods such as Surya, Agni, Marut, the *Pañcabhūtas*, the constellations, and the *navagrahas*, remindful of the *lōkapāla* theory of the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition [*Prp.* II.5]. Poets eulogize the Cēras as wearing garlands made of seven crowns [*Prp.* II.6, V.5]. A poem says that Ko-perumcēral Iruporai protects his *kuṭimākkḷ* exactly how a mother fosters her child, and this reminds us of the concept in the second edict of Asoka (Separate Edict 2) that equates the relation between the king and his subjects with that of the parent and his children. However, the mother-metaphor is very important in the context of the kinship-basis of contemporary polity.

The claim of identity with the Brahmanic tradition shows its increasing influence on the political power. It is clear from the poetic expressions and descriptions in *Patirruppattu* relating to the nature of the political authority of the Cēras, that they were seeking to legitimize it by drawing ideas heavily from Vedic *itihāsic-purāṇic-śāstraic* Brahmanism. Their authority is characterized in terms of *purāṇic-śāstraic* notions and status legitimized by comparing and associating them with epic characters. A poem claims that Cēramān Perumcōrrutiyan conquered the land of the Pāṇḍavas and hosted a feast for both the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas after the Bhārata war [*PN* 2]. There are references in the poems to the Cēras possessing an army of the classical fourfold division, conquering many rulers and subjecting them to a subordinate position. In several songs, the Cēras are described as the overlord of all monarchs in the land between the Himalayas and Kanyakumari.

Such epic, *śāstraic*, *purāṇic* claims are common to the other *Vēntar* too. Several are examples of high-sounding claims that seek to legitimize the status of the *Vēntar*. All the *Vēntar* are mentioned to have incised their emblems on the Himalayas and hoisted flags on its peaks. Each one of them is said to have ruled the land surrounded by the Himalayas and the seas. A poem eulogizes Pāṇḍya Māran Valūti as ferocious enough to frighten the north Indian kings [*PN* 52]. However, most poems hold the authority of the *mūvēntar* over Tamilakam as a matter of tacit recognition. It is maintained in the poems that the whole of Tamilakam belonged to them. However, the concept of territory was not distinct from the ideal based on an overall general perception of the landscape as demarcated by the eastern hill and the western sea. It is significant to note that the edicts of Asoka referred to them not as individual rulers,

¹⁵ It is said that originally there were ten units of ten poems (10 × 10) each dedicated to the ten Cēra chieftains. The first unit of ten poems and the last unit of ten poems (the first ten and the last ten) are not available, for they are lost.

but as clans of kindred descendants as expressions like *Satiyaṣuto* and *Kēraṣaputo* suggest. There seems to be a lot of difference between the image that the poets attribute to the *Vēntar* and the reality about what they were. We know that the whole of Tamilakam did not belong to them and there were other tribute-receiving chiefs like Atiyamān, who were almost nearer to the *Vēntar* in status. A poem in praise of Neṭumān Anci warns all the chiefs of agrarian settlements to rush to him with *tīrai* if they wished to retain their *Ūrs* with them [PN 97]. Many of the hill chiefs were uncompromisingly opposed to the *Vēntar*. Pāri of Paṟampumalai, who offered strong resistance to the *Vēntar*, though he was subsequently defeated and killed, is a good example.

The reality was that *Vēntar* were also chiefs, but the crucial difference was their greater resource power, larger redistributive intercommunity relationship, and better access to cultural sources of legitimization. They were surrounded by *brahmana pulavar* of the Vedic tradition and a few were well informed of the śāstraic-purāṇic notions of kingship. But a predatory chieftain, whose status and power were linked with the range of the redistributive community network, could have hardly gone by śāstraic prescriptions. A poem by a scholarly bard reminds Pāṇḍya Nanmāran of the fact that *aṟaneṟi mutarrē aracin korram* meaning 'greatness of royalty' remained with the primacy of *dharma* [PN 55]. All songs in *Ceviyaṟivūruturai* contain ideas of this type, which sounded exotic in a milieu of plunder raids and redistribution and the *Vēntar* continued to depend upon heroism and gift-giving. *Pāṇas* (bards) and their heroic compositions were the main strength behind their name, fame, and legitimacy. They kept the image of the *Vēntar* by roaming round the land with their songs in praise of the latter's exploits. The *Panārruppaṭai* category of poems itself exemplifies the instituted nature of such circuits.

Now we may try an abstraction of the broad trends in the political process. Before we identify the forces of change in the process and understand their direction, the structure of the process has to be made a little clearer. The basic constituent in the structure was *kuṭi* or family. A particular *kuṭimākkal* or a host of families of one particular group and their *kōmān* or *perumakan* (chief) constituted the simplest structure that signified an organized settlement or *Ūr* bound by kinship. This could spontaneously evolve as a *nāṭu* through the process of the expansion of one and the same *kuṭimākkal* through their agnatic and affinal relatives as exemplified by the hill chiefdoms. A collection of kinship-based *Ūrs* of a variety of *kuṭimākkal* integrated under a chief as his *nāṭu* signifies the subsequent structure of complex relations transcending kinship, as exemplified by the lowland chiefdoms. Within such *nāṭu* units, the structure of the *Ūr* also involved complex relations when an alien chief and his *kuṭi* were superimposed on it. In short, the disintegration of the kinship base of the *Ūr* was the crux of the process of change in the total structure.

The central character of contemporary political process was linked up with predatory operations and booty redistribution. Predatory marches of chiefs, their

ravaging of settlements, arbitrary redistribution of the *Ūr*, and the consequent migration and subsequent immigration were the characteristic features of the period under review. Formation of dispersed settlements in the place of nuclear units of kinship groups was a major consequence of these events. Redistribution of resources beyond the clan-kin ties had certain crucial consequences. It appears that at some point in time the institution of redistribution involved gifts of *Ūr* to warrior chiefs, obviously predatory control rather than ownership. As scholarly brahmanas were part of the redistributive social relationship, such gifts seem to have been made to them too, though not extensively.¹⁶ Generally brahmana households of the time were those depending on pastoral wealth rather than agrarian resources, as exemplified by the case of Kauṇḍiyan Viṅṅan Tāyan of Punjārrūr [PN 166]. However, not being cultivators, the land gifted to brahmanas had to be tilled by others, and it implied the emergence of a new system of relations in production transcending kinship.

The characterization of the political structure of a complex of unevenly evolved chiefdoms that are actively interrelated is extremely difficult as it defies labelling or categorization based on known models. In the sense that the state means a centralized political authority of due sanction and legitimization within a defined territory, with a regular taxation system and a standing army and bureaucracy, we cannot identify it as the state. It is not the structure of an easily explicable pre-state either, although various levels of the political formation signify different stages of pre-state developments. Further, there is an overlap of these stages at all levels, adding to its complexity. At the *Vēntar* level authority, some features of the state are found interspersed with predominantly non-state features, while they are absent at the level of hill chiefs or forest chiefs. Compared to the *Sātavāhanas*, the *mūvēntar* seem to have had a lesser range of control over trade and trade-routes, for the Tamil macro region unlike the Deccan was not extensively networked by merchants, monks and monastic establishments. Many songs in the anthologies refer to the hazardous nature of the long journey of merchants and caravans through forests and arid plains where no facilities of life or protection from wayside robbers were available [PN 60, 116, 310, 313; AN 190]. This probably points to the nature of the political formations that precluded the instituted arrangements for protecting and maintaining trade and trade routes. They seem to have been actively involved in promoting overseas exchange by seeking to prevent pirates and make ‘arrangement of lights’ on the shore for guiding the ships sailing towards the coast at night. But they had no role in the organization of overseas commerce due to various reasons in which the absence of the state was a decisive one.¹⁷ Overseas exchange must have benefited them by providing with prestige goods that could enhance their status both through their possession as

¹⁶ Pāṇḍyan Mutukuṭumi Peruvalūti’s gift of a village as an *ēkabhōga brahmadēya* mentioned in the Velvikuti Plates is an example.

¹⁷ For a detailed consideration of the issue, see Gurukkal 2013: 67-78.

treasure as well as redistribution. But this could hardly have led to any fundamental transformation in their political structure for it had no impact on the social mode of labour realization or productive relations of the time.

As already noted, the principal social mode of labour realization was familial and cooperative with little scope for specialization. However, a few crafts like metal-working and pottery were full-time trades of specialists and hence hereditary.¹⁸ As the most extensively used metal, iron had a central place among metals as the base of weapons whose significance in a society of predatory operations is explicit. Moreover, the practice of burying iron objects along with the dead had pushed a great deal of iron out of circulation, presupposing continuous iron-working as a full-time occupation of hereditary specialization. The production of earthen pots, a characteristically brittle artefact, was obviously a continuous full-time activity, for their use was extensive both for the living as well as the dead. Moreover, the fabric, polish, glazing, slips, paintings, texture, and decorative designs of pottery suggest that it was a full-time technology of specialized expertise.

The number of such full-time artisans and craftsmen of hereditary occupations was relatively more in the headquarters of bigger chieftains of the *Vēḷir* and *Vēntar* levels. As the major redistributive pools of resources, the chieftains' settlements could support more full-time crafts. Another full-time function of a hereditary nature was that of the warriors. Every settlement (*Ūr*) needed full-time warriors since the main mode of political appropriation of resources was predatory. In association with the chiefly households, there were three other full-time hereditary functionaries: the *pānar* (bards), *paraiyar* (who play a kind of raid drum called *para*), and *tuṭiyar* (who play a small drum called *tuṭi*).

There was a slow emergence of hereditary occupations in the *Vēntar* level chiefly headquarters, marketing centres, coastal towns and ports. In the chiefly headquarters hereditary craftsmen households seem to have existed as people of obligatory service relations with the chieftain. Specialized dealers in arts, crafts and other products, probably as organized into corporation (*nikamam*) were also present in marketing centres, coastal towns and ports, but being mostly part of the long distance itinerant merchant community, they were not integral to the local people. However, it is likely that the overseas and inland merchants had required servile people at the place of sojourn for various menial jobs. Such people at service under conditions of coercion were workers representing a system of relations of labour transcending kinship. Poems refer to captives working in pearl fisheries. Nevertheless, all this was not enough to give rise to social differentiation and stratification in any significant way. In the process of predatory operations and redistribution, some kind of differential allocation of new position, status, roles, and prestige within the complex redistributive relationships

¹⁸ This has been discussed at length in Gurukkal 1993-1994: 22-33. It has been reprinted in Gurukkal 2009.

was likely. Differential allocation of positions and roles at the instance of the *Vēntar* level chiefly authority had a tendency towards formation of a hierarchy. However, the poems do not contain any clue to the existence of a clearly stratified society.¹⁹ They show social differentiation of a simple kind confined to the binary between *uyarntōr* (the highborn) that comprised brahmanas and *iḷipīrappālar* (the lowborn) that comprised all people. They also show the differentiation at the level of the objective conditions of life, which was quite simple. The people were differentiated between the redistributors (*puravalar*) comprising of the chiefly households and their dependents (*iravalar*) comprising of beneficiaries of redistribution. These beneficiaries included even brahmanas. This suggests that contemporary social division was quite fluid and bereft of fixed intermediary positions.

Nevertheless, there were certain contradictions immanent in the working of the social formation, the most striking being the continued articulation of conditions totally uncongenial to the development of plough agriculture, which was the most potential form of production in terms of technology and productivity. Predatory marches of chieftains, their destruction of agrarian settlements as part of the scorched-earth policy in raids, and the dominance of the heroic ideology of raids and booty redistribution provided an utterly adverse environment for the development of agriculture.²⁰ Redistributive economy did exert pressure on production, but in vain since there was no scope for intensification of agriculture under the kinship-based division of labour. External labour mobilization sufficient to break the fetters of kinship was beyond the capability of contemporary political apparatus of little coercive ability. This stasis due to development incompatibility between plough technology and relations of kin labour, being an ever intensifying pressure, the social formation was any way in the process of dissolution. It was unevenly and slowly heading towards economic differentiation and class stratification, letting the most resourceful among the chiefdoms passing through antecedents of the state formation.

Conclusion

To sum up, the central argument of the paper is that in the period under review (the first century BCE and third century CE), most people in the Deccan and the Tamil macro region were integral to descent groups adapted to multiple landscape ecosystems with appropriate strategies of subsistence that included plough agriculture in a relatively limited way, but largely under the dominance of the agro-pastoral. There was extensive trade network across settlements, frequent circulation of long distance itinerant merchants, local chieftains, Buddhist monks, mendicants and others, widely

¹⁹ For a different perception, see Kennedy 1976: 1-15.

²⁰ See details given in Gurukkal 1987: 56-57. This is reprinted in Gurukkal 2009: 155-165.

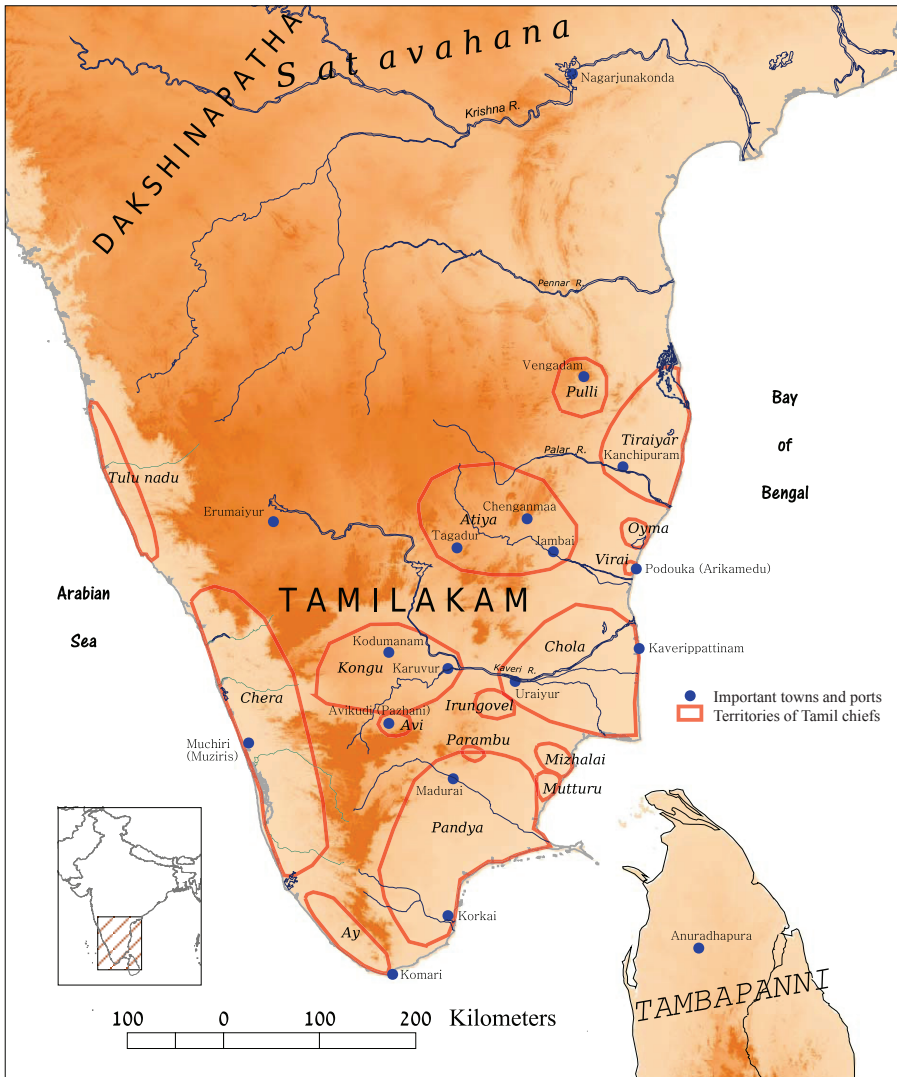


Fig. 1.3: Map of Chieftainships and Exchange Centers

distributed monastic establishments, specialized crafts production, marketing centres, and monetized transaction in the Deccan region. All these features, except Buddhist monastic institutions were true of the Tamil macro region too but probably on a lesser scale. Socio-economic processes in the Deccan and the Tamil macro region indicate that the pattern of distribution of political power in the regions represented an ensemble of unevenly evolving chiefdoms. In both the regions the society was yet to become predominantly class-structured even in the third century CE, precluding the existence of the state. The political process in the Deccan as well as the Tamil macro region was that of chiefdoms with antecedents far from or near to the state. There is some evidence in the case of the chiefdoms in the Andhra and the Kalinga regions undergoing the process of the state formation. Compared to them the *Vēntar* level chiefdom in the Tamil macro region was not far behind. Another argument is that features such as class-structured social hierarchy, delimited territory, standing army, bureaucracy, and periodic exaction presided by a crowned monarch were not manifest even in the Deccan region to call the political formation of the Sātavāhanas, a mature state system. The political organization of the Tamil macro region being determined by the redistributive economy and social relationships sustained through predatory accumulation of resources, even in the *Vēntar* set up, was predominantly of the chiefdom level. Manifestation of the mature state in Peninsular India was a major socio-economic and political process of concurrent nature inseparably linked to the extensive penetration and institutionalized expansion of wet-rice agriculture into the deltas of the Godavari-Krishna rivers in the Deccan and of Kaveri-Tamraparni rivers in the Tamil region, which happened only after two to three centuries. The antecedents thereof hence involved a series of transitions – the transition from kin labour to non-kin labour, from general functionaries to hereditary occupation groups of specialization, from clans to castes, from descent community settlements to structured agrarian villages, and from chiefdom to the state.

Abbreviations

PN : *Puṛānānūṛu*

AN : *Akanānūṛu*

Prp : *Patirruppattu*

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