

# **Need to speed up archaeological excavations that will shed more light on Tamils' antiquity**



## **Jayabal Rathinam**

It is artefacts, the remains of ancient times, unearthed during archaeological excavations, which help establish scientifically the Tamil society's antiquity and its sublime cultural values. Robert Bruce Foote, British geologist and archaeologist, in 1863 C.E. discovered the stone axe at Pallavaram near Chennai, which the people of the Stone Age had used, and recorded for the first time the antiquity of India, in general, and Tamil Nadu, in particular, on the world map of archaeology.

Consequently, researchers of Archaeology Survey of India, Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department, Madras University and Tamil University, Thanjavur, conducted excavations in various parts of Tamil Nadu and came up with reports after unearthing the artefacts of Tamil antiquity. They have shed light on the history of Tamils. But at a time when the pace of excavations has slowed

down, the Keezhadi excavations have stressed the need for seamlessly carrying on with the archaeological examinations.

Fortunately, the DMK government has been paying special attention to the excavation work. The Chief Minister and the Minister of Archaeology have expedited the work and are monitoring it. The archaeological discoveries have driven home to the world the antiquity of Tamils. Particularly, the Keezhadi excavations have pushed the antiquity of Tamils back by a century. The excavations conducted on the banks of the Porunai river have stressed the need for writing the Indian history beginning from Tamil Nadu. Moreover, the artefacts excavated are showcased at the museum.

Currently steps have been taken to conduct excavations at 10 places and to initiate researches on the pre-historic remains discovered in some districts. While it is welcome that the archaeological excavations have, of late, been gaining momentum, it is worthwhile to point out certain drawbacks on this count.

The Archaeology Survey of India (ASI) has discovered 157 places in Tamil Nadu and declared them as protected heritage sites found, after preliminary field researches, to be having ancient remains including pre-historic dwellings and monuments. The ASI took into its custody these ancient sites found in the period from 1921 to 1948 in order to conduct further excavations at the heritage sites.

Each of these places in question has lands, government and private, measuring two acres to above 250 acres. Except a few, all these sites have no fences and are left in dilapidated condition. Most of these protected heritage sites are fossilized. If these sites are massive in size, running to acres, it is easy to conjecture how large the residential areas near them must have been in the olden days.

The ASI has, so far, conducted excavations at over 50 places in Tamil Nadu. But of the 157 places declared as heritage sites, only

a few places such as Mammalapuram, Adhichanallur, Aricamedu, Amirthamangalam, Poondi, Kaniyampoondi, Mothur etc. have witnessed excavations. Other places are not in this list. The Tamil Nadu Archaeology Department has till date conducted excavations at over 40 places of which only Adhichanallur figures in the list of 157 places. Others are different sites.

The Madras University and the Thanjavur Tamil University have conducted archaeological excavations at over 20 places none of which is protected by the ASI. 70 to 100 years have passed since the 157 places have been declared by the ASI as protected heritage sites. But except at a few places above mentioned, at none of these places, excavations have been conducted. As these places of antique value have been left unprotected, the private sites and government lands concerned will witness overuse and encroachments and as a result, the ancient remains buried deep down will become rotten beyond recognition. There are also recorded data about them. Hence, these monumental sites must be excavated very soon.

In the first phase, the monumental parts of these protected heritage sites must be excavated and the discovered remains sent for carbon dating. Then, on the basis of truths thrown up by the carbon dating, further measures must be taken. These are ideal steps.

The people living in various places are very curious to know about the antiquity and cultural significance of their home turfs for they are, of late, getting more archaeologically aware.

It is quite unfortunate that though the ASI has taken over the protected heritage sites, it has not taken follow-up measures. It hardly makes sense to keep them just as heritage sites while no excavations are conducted on them.

In this case, the Tamil Nadu government on its own must come forward to conduct excavations at these places. The data,

obtained from the archaeological exercise, will further be a boost to the antiquity and cultural richness of Tamils.

The Tamil Nadu government is, no doubt, quite eager to re-construct the history of Tamil based on researches on the Tamil roots and cultural remains of the past. So, it must provide a shot in the arm for the Tamil archaeological study. Excavations must be launched in the monumental parts of the heritage sites and send the remains for carbon dating. It is a keen desire of not only the archaeologists and activists but also the people living in the places where the heritage sites are located.

Will the government do the needful in time?

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