

A royal legacy

The ancient Kalingarayar canal has fed Kongu region for over 700 years

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The story of the Kalingarayar canal is closely entwined with the history of Kongunad. It was a hydrological wonder when it was constructed and continues to be vital today.

The canal connects the three tributaries of the Cauvery — Bhavani, Noyyal and Amaravathi and the records of its building were lost during Tipu Sultan's invasion. The little information we have comes from some notes preserved by Muthuramaswami Kalingarayar, the 13th Polygar of Uthukuli.

Kalingan, the builder of the Kalingarayar canal, was the ruler of Poondurai division, one of the 24 divisions of Kongunad. His capital was Vellode and he was the ruler of 32 villages.

According to one story, Kalingan overheard a cook asking his bride's father whether he should use coarse or fine rice to serve the guests at the betrothal. To which the response was: "What does it matter whether you cook coarse or fine rice for people living in dry lands?"

The remark was made in jest but Kalingarayar took offence and left saying he would wed only after he raised wet crops in his lands.

A dejected Kalingarayar returned to his capital and vowed not to shave till he

The strain of paddy grown in his lands came to be known as Kalingan paddy.



GREEN IS THE COLOUR The Kalingarayar canal continues to help farmers in the region PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

achieved his goal.

Legend has it that Lord Subramanya appeared in his dream as an old man and advised him to construct an anicut at Bhavani and dig a canal to fulfil his ambition. He was also advised to choose a place where a peacock had chased a snake.

Kalingarayar understood that a meandering canal was the solution and work for the canal began in 1270 A.D. It took 12 years to complete (1282 A.D.) and was dedicated to the people of Kongunad.

The canal was constructed with difficulty. Despite being the ruler, Kalingarayar had to acquire the land by paying over 1000

units of gold as compensation to create a road between the Urachi Hills and the site of construction. Eminent agrarian, Sivagiri Palaniswamy says another 1000 units were paid for the boulders needed because the ruler believed in fair play.

In order to choose the site of the dam Kalingarayar went on a coracle ride with a fisherman who was then granted special privileges at a temple festival. These privileges continue to this day.

He also gave some people privileges at the Elamalai Sellandiamman temple celebrations as they provided implements for the construction.

Kalingarayar's barber gave him a clean shave after 12 years of toil and the happy ruler named a village after his community and honoured them.

Kalingarayar understood that he had to take everyone along. He was quick and early to bring in social reform by permitting some socially backward classes to paint and plaster their houses and wear footwear. He even permitted them to use musical instruments during special occasions.

Besides the canal, Kalingarayar also constructed several check dams, tanks and water bodies in Kongunad.

These helped create prosperity in the region

and, finally, he was able to cultivate wetland crops. The strain of paddy grown in his lands came to be known as Kalingan paddy.

Kalingarayar received encomiums from the Pandya ruler. Kalingarayar then moved to Uthukuli near Pollachi and established a fiefdom there.

Today the canal measures 56.5 miles and unites all the rivers of Kongunad and over 50,000 farmers now harvest their crops thanks to the Kalingarayar canal.



Every year, the water flows for 10 and a half months in the canal, according to the PWD Order No. 2647 dated 2/11/1966). The region has been enriched by the Kalingarayar canal for over 700 years.

Kalingarayar's descendants played an active role under the rulers of Vijayanagar, the Nayaks of Madurai and the Wodeyars of Mysore. Diwan Bahadur Muthuramaswami Kalingarayar did much for Coimbatore and Pollachi during the times of the English.

The engineers responsible for the Mettur dam are said to have analysed the Kalingarayar canal and several Europeans including Schwartz (1779), Buchanan (1800), Mckenzie (1798) and Arundale (1880) have recorded their praise and appreciation for Kalingarayar and his canal.

The Government of Tamil Nadu has declared the fifth of the Tamil month of Thai as the "Kalingarayar Day" and a grateful agrarian community celebrates it as "Kalingarayar Pongal".

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