

## A Chronological Study of Bridges in Tirunelveli District: A Special Reference to Sulochana Mudaliar Bridge & Thiruvalluvar Bridge

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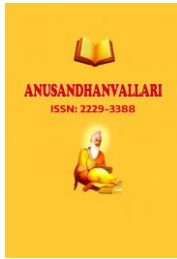
### Introduction

Most of the bridges in Tirunelveli District were built in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some bridges were constructed with the help of the funds raised by the local citizens and some with the financial assistance of the government. The bridge across the Tamirabarani River connecting Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai is an important bridge in the district. There is an interesting history behind this bridge. Sulochana Mudaliar is a testament to a man who sacrificed his wealth for the common people. The people of Tirunelveli found it very difficult to cross the Tamirabarani River between Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai. Therefore, during the British rule in India, a noble family in Tirunelveli was financed and the entire construction cost was borne by the Sulochana Mudaliar family. The Iradukku flyover, an important bridge in Tirunelveli District, is the first bridge built in Asia. This article focuses on **The History of Bridges in Tirunelveli District – A Special Reference to Sulochana Mudaliar & Thiruvalluvar Bridges** constructed by the Government of India and some of them by the efforts of esteemed individuals.

### Timeline of bridges in Tirunelveli District.

Tirunelveli District is located in the southern part of Tamil Nadu. The name ‘Tirunelveli’ consists of three Tamil words (*tiru*, *nel*, and *veli*) which means “Sacred Paddy hedge”. The name Tirunelveli implies the fertility of the town.

The Tirunelveli District. is also famous for bridges. Tirunelveli is also a major junction for transportation around Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Kanyakumari District. Most of the Bridges in Tirunelveli District were constructed during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Bridge over the river Tamirabarani near Ambasamudram was constructed in 1841 at a cost of Rs. 17275/- . The money was raised through local subscriptions. In 1852, a bridge over the Chittar was built on Tirunelveli-Sankarankoil road by public subscription. A seven arched bridge was constructed by Horsley across the river Chittar at Gangaikondan in 1844. Another bridge over the river Hariharanadhi, near Tenkasi was also built in 1853 from the funds raise by way of public donation. . In 1860 a small bridge across Nambiar and Dalapathi Samudram was constructed and contract system was tried during the construction for the first time. On the 38.4. km. road from Palayamkottai to Thoothukudi a bridge was constructed in 1866 at a cost of Rs. 18457|-. During the floods in 1869, extensive damage was caused to the bridge at Tirunelveli and Ambasamudram. Both the bridge were subsequently repaired in 1873. A bridge over the river Tamirabarani was built in 1891 at Vikramasingapuram by the Tirunelveli Mills ( Now Madura Fabrics-Coats Viella India Limited) for their own use. But eventually it was thrown open to the public also. Now an R.C.C. Bridge across the river Tamirabarani ( 5spans each of 20 metres width) on the upstream side of existing steel girder bridge had been constructed in 1891 at a cost of Rs. 65 lakhs. (The Madura Coats authorities had contributed 50 per cent of the estimated cost of the bridge.



In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a lull in bridge construction activity and only maintenance work was carried out. During the first Five Year Plan period, three bridges were constructed in the District. The biggest bridge was then one across the river Gatana, in Ambasamudram –Alangulam road. The other was across the Nambiyar near Nanguneri and third one was across the river Karamani near Manapadu. The cost of construction of these bridges was Rs. 4.44 lakhs, 1.08 lakhs and 2.05 lakhs, respectively. At km. 122/8 Thoothukudi- Tirunelveli-Shencottah-Quilon road, a (State Highways) single span bridge of three metres was constructed across the jungle stream in the year 1997 at a cost of Rs. 7.8. lakhs. At km. 5/8 of Nanguneri-Eruvadi-Thirukrunkudi road bridge of three spans, each of eight metres across the river Nambiyar, in lieu of the existing causeway, had been constructed at a cost of Rs. 35 lakh and opened for traffic in March 1998. The existing bridge at km 27/10 of Cheranmahadevi Panagudi road had been widened which caused an expenditure of Rs 10 lakhs and from March 1998, this widened stretch has been helping vehicular traffic in moving fast. <sup>2</sup>

### **Sulochana Mudaliar Bridge**

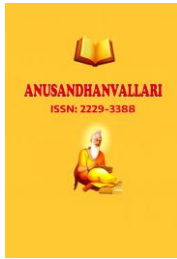
Vedha Tri Dasa Mudaliar was the son of Sulochana Mudaliar an acclaimed lawyer, who later retired as a judge in Thiruvananthapuram. He named his son Sulochana Mudaliar and his grandson Padmanabha Mudaliar who was also born in Kerala. Mr.P.Bhakatavatchalam is the great-great grandson of Sulochana Mudaliar, who belongs to the 6<sup>th</sup> generation of Mudaliar family, who lives on narrate the achievements of his forefathers.<sup>3</sup>

A very important bridge in the district is the one across the river Tamirabarani connecting Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai. The bridge has an interesting History behind it. Sulochana Mudaliar Bridge in Tirunelveli is a testament of one man's sacrifice of his wealth for the public. It was very difficult for the people of Tirunelveli to cross the river, Tamirabarani which flows between the twin cities of Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai. Though the bridge was constructed by the British Indian Government during the 1840s, the project was funded by Sulochana Mudaliar, who belonged to an aristocratic family in Tirunelveli during the British rule in India. In fact the entire cost of construction was borne by the family of Sulochana Mudaliar.<sup>4</sup>

The public demand for a bridge across the Tamirabarani, connecting Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai, led to an initiative in this direction by the then district administration. When the question of raising funds for the construction of the bridge came up, the family of Sulochana Mudaliar came forward to fund the entire project. The family of Sulochana Mudaliar wanted to gift the bridge to the people of Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai.

The shores of Tamirabarani was always a busy one, with traders, vendors and common people trying to reach the other end for their livelihood. Men were bribed, goods were stolen, anti-socialists created problem amongst people. The boat service was the only means of transport to reach other end and people would often fight to get priority seating and thieves would use this opportunity to steal goods. So the operation of boat service everyday was a hideous task even the Britishers who ruled India during the period were worried about this.<sup>5</sup>

The people requested the British to build a bridge connecting these cities in order to end the calamities that often rose amongst the shores. But the Britishers rejected their plea due to the hefty amount they had to invest. But in the year 1840 a riot broke out which led to a series of murders. This incident left the collector worried as it had been only five days since he had been appointed as the collector in charge. So he immediately wrote a letter to the Madras Presidency requesting for a bridge and urging its importance. After getting the Government's approval collector E.B.Thomson summons for a meeting which included several British officials Captain Faber, Engineer W.H.Horsley and Sulochana Mudaliar who held an important posting in the collector's office.



Several conclusions were drawn at the end of the meeting. Captain Faber was given the responsibility of drafting a plan for the construction of the bridge and he did it whole heartedly .He drew a plan similar to the Waterloo bridge which overlooks the River Thames, London and Engineer W.H. Horsley to charge of executing his plan.

The collector thereafter decided to tax the people for the funds after all it was for their welfare. Moreover he also wanted the affluent people in town to fund for the bridge so he sought the help of Sulochana Mudaliar who under him to aid him to collect money ,but Sulochana Mudaliar was not so pleased as he was a rich man himself and he wondered what people would think if he went asking for money. Although Sulochana Mudaliar worked as a translator he did it out of respect, he was a wealthy person. His father Ramalinga Mudaliar worked as a translator under Major Banner who played a major role in the conviction of the martyr Kattabomman.

Thereafter Colonel Macaulay appointed him as an administrative officer under his administration in Thiruvananthapuram. Moreover Sulochana Mudaliar's son was an acclaimed lawyer in Thiruvananthapuram. Such was the royal background of the Mudaliar family .Most of the wealth accumulated had been passed down through generations with a major section contributed by Ramalinga Mudaliar.

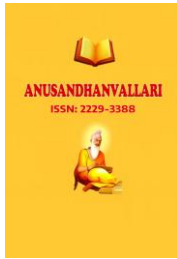
Like his father Ramalinga who bridged the gap between two men by means of his language Sulochana wanted to bridge the gap between the two cities by means of his wealth for the welfare of his people. So he decided to fund for the construction of the bridge. Before informing his decision to the collector he narrated the events of the day to his wife Vadivammal, who reflecting his thoughts graciously offered her jewels as an initiative.

The collector and the people of Tirunelveli were stunned by the decision taken up by Sulochana Mudaliar. This boosted up the spirits of the collector who immediately began its construction works. The British provided manpower by providing hundred prisoners who were facing lifetime imprisonment in palayamkottai jail and stones being hauled from the palayamkottai fort the construction of the bridge is done under a rapid speed under the supervision of Engineer W.H.Horsley and other technical specialists provided by the British Government.<sup>6</sup>

Government began to invest in transportation during the years of reform following 1840, and funds were put to good use, stimulating numerous private contributions. The first official act to signal a new era came in the year 1840. A Philanthropic citizen of Tirunelveli, Sulochana Mudaliar, who was holding the post of Naib Sherishtadar in Collector's office at Tirunelveli. <sup>7</sup> The first stone of this bridge was laid by E.P. Thompson, Collector of Tinnevely in the year 1840. The work commenced during the administration of John 8<sup>th</sup> Lord Elphinstone owes its origin solely to the noble Philanthropy and enlightened liberality of Sulochana Mudaliar Naib, Sherestadar of the province who has donated the sum of 40,000, Rupees to its construction.<sup>8</sup>

After being designed by Captain Faber, the design was executed by Lieut.Horsley, the District Engineer. This is an important bridge connecting the two big towns (i.e.) Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai. The total length of the bridge is 760' with a width of 21'5". The cost was just over half a lakh of rupees which was considered moderate cost even at that period.<sup>9</sup>

The Sulochana Mudaliar Bridge widening work was constructed by M. Subramanian & Company (Allied concern of M. Nilakandan& Brothers) Engineers & Contractors, Madras under the supervision of Highways and Rural Works Department.<sup>10</sup> The Bridge was opened by Sri. M. Bhaktavatsalam, B.A., B.L.,



Chief Minister of Tamil Nādu, presided by Sri Ramiah B.A., Minister for Food, Madras for traffic on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1967.<sup>11</sup>

### Thiruvalluvar Bridge

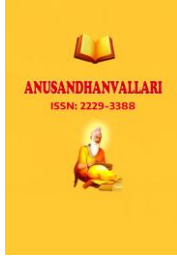
Another important bridge in the district is the two tiers over bridge, namely Thiruvalluvar Bridge at Tirunelveli Junction was constructed to avoid the railway line crossing. This flyover was built by the Chief Minister Karunanithi in the year 1969. The foundation stone was laid by the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Karunanithi at a cost of Rs. 47 lakhs. Having two feet in the screwball Chief Minister Karunanithi named the bridge to **Thiruvallur Eradukku Mempalam** because this bridge was built like that.<sup>12</sup> This Bridge was opened for traffic in 1972.<sup>13</sup>

The total length of the bridge is 800 metres. This type of two Tier Bridge constructed in Tirunelveli by the Highways Department is the first of its kind in India. This two tier bridge consists of 25 spans of which 13 are of bow string arch, each with a width of 30.30. Metres and 12 are single tier R.C.C grinder each having a width of 11.72. Metres.<sup>14</sup> The total cost of this bridge, including the cost of the land, and the cost of service roads worked out to Rs 84 lakhs.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Sulochana Mudaliar Bridge stands splendidly over the river Thamirabarani and connects the twin cities of Tirunelveli and Palayamkottai. This 180 year old bridge remains notable for its construction as it had withstood the test of times. This British India Bridge was named after the philanthropist Sulochana Mudaliar who gave away all his wealth towards the construction of the bridge that has been for the welfare of the people. The British Government refused to sponsor for the bridge owing to its huge sum of amount. At the time, Sulochana Mudaliar came forward and took up the expenses of the bridge single handedly. Though British India knew Sulochana Mudaliar for his selfless sacrifice as decades went by, history seems to forget good men and their valuable contributions. Now a tiny sign board points out the actual name of the bridge and for many natives it is called the Thamirabarani Bridge. A man like Sulochana Mudaliar must be celebrated, the present and generations to come must be aware of this Donar (kodi vallal) and his valorous deeds. The Thiruvallur Bridge in Tirunelveli, also known as the Thiruvallur Eradukku Mempaalam” or “Rettai Paalam” locally, is a two-tier Bridge. It was built by the then Chief Minister Kalaingar Karunanidhi and was opened to the public in 1972. Although such a bridge has the distinction of being the first bridge in Asia, the public has been requesting that this old bridge be repaired through maintenance work as the bridge often gets damaged.

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- [1] S.C. Bhatt, *The Encyclopedia District Gazetteer of India*, Southern Zone, Vol.II, (New Deli, 1997), p.1031.
  - [2] S.K. Velmani, *Gazetteers of India Tirunelveli District*, Vol.II (Chennai, 2002), p.717.
  - [3] Information collected from Mr. Bhaktavatchalam, great-great grandson of Sulochana Mudaliar,
  - [4] K.S.K. Velmani., *Op.cit.*, Vol.II p.716.
  - [5] Gudan,*Perumpulligal*, (Madurai,1994),pp.170-171.
  - [6] Gudan, *op.cit.*, p.175.
  - [7] David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, (Madras, 1993), p.135.
  - [8] *Copper Plate* issued to Sulochana Mudaliar by British Government in the year 1840.
  - [9] R. Narumbunathan, *Neer-Nilam-Manitharkal*, (Chennai,2021), p.95.
  - [10] *Tablet* found in SulochanaMudaliar Bridge, Tirunelveli.



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- [11] **Tablet** found in SulochanaMudaliar Bridge, Tirunelveli, dated, 10.01.1967.  
[12] **Daily Thanthi** , Tirunelveli Edition, dated 14.08.2024.  
[13] Dr. Balasubramanian, **Manam Tharum Nellai Man** , (Chennai, 2017), p.160.  
[14] **Ibid.**, p.161.  
[15] K.S.K. Velmani., **Op.cit.**, Vol.II p.718.