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BLOG · Kongu History · Kongu History

Kongu History

Details

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## Kongu Landscape

Kongu Vellalar Community is the dominant community in the Kongu Region of Taminlnadu. Kongu region mainly comprises of the district of Coimbatore, Periyar, Dharmapuri, Salem and Palani taluq of Madurai district. The total area of the traditional Kongu region is about 7500 sq. miles. Through the Kongu plain flows the Kaveri, one of the most important rivers in South India. There are a number of small rivers such as Bhavani, Amaravathi, Neyyaru etc. that finally join with Cauvery and flow to Cauvery delta in the fertile Tanjore district. Despite its many small rivers, Kongu is essentially an extremely dry plain. Rain is infrequent and less dependable than anywhere else in Tamilnadu. Most of Kongu farmers however still depend on deeps well for farming.

## Kongu Origin

We do not have a record of the history of the land and the people who lived there. There existed only local legends and snippets of stories told by Tamil poets from which we can only reconstruct the history of the land. Until the tenth century or so, the Kongu was a heavily forested area, its small population living largely by hunting and herding rather than by direct cultivation of the soil. It is said that the great Chola warriors expanded into the Kongu region, cleared the forests and established agricultural settlements. Certain clans soon distinguished themselves in local battles fought to win the land and to establish agricultural settlements. As a result, the Chola king rewarded them by giving them rights to fine tracks of land. The clans which are named are among the prosperous Gounder caste in Kongu today.

Gounders enlisted the help of service class people to carry on their daily lives in their settlements. Hence we have Kongu barbers, Kongu washerman, Kongu carpenter etc.

Later Kongu area was occupied by different Kings - Vijayanayagar empire, Mysore Udayars, Hyder Ali and finally the British. Each empire brought in its own wave of immigrants. That may explain why we find all sorts of people in the region speaking Telugu, Kannada and Urdu besides Tamil.


## The Brothers - Our Ancestors

**The Story of Brothers** is a well known folklore in the Kongu region depicting the migration of the Gounders to the Kongu region and their eventual victory over the land. Statues of Brothers is a familiar sight in the Kongu region. Ironically the people who take great interest in the story are not Gounders. They are from Kongu Chettiars and Marmeri Natars. The present chief minister Dr. M. Karunanithi has written a historical novel titled 'Ponnar-Sankar' based on this story.





## Signaturesaravanan

 Image

that about 31% of the Kongu population belongs to Gounder caste. It is said that about 5 million persons or about 10 percent of Tamilnadu population belong to Gounder caste. But these estimates vary widely.

### Historical Figures: Pattakkarars

As Kongu Nadu never played a central role in shaping the history of Tamilnadu, we do not have well studied historical figures from our community. Recently the heroic battle of Theeran Chinnamali against the British was recognized by the Tamilnadu government and a statue has been erected in Chennai honoring him.

It is said that KalingaRayan of CheeThanThy clan was famous for his association with Chola kings. He built a dam across Bhavani river and constructed 56 mile long canal and made the lands of Punthuri very fertile. Still the canal is called KalingaRayan canal.

The Kongu history is very much identified with the four titled families that belong to Gounder community. There titled families are:

- PaRilakoTTai PaTTakkarar (payira clan)
- KaTayur PaTTakkarar (porulanthi clan)
- Putur PaTTakkarar (CenkaNNan clan)
- CankaraNTampalayam PaTTakkarar (periya clan)

They not only controlled large areas of land but also acted as final courts of appeal in serious disputes. Their titles (PaTTams) were directly granted from the kings. All the four families lived in the central part of Kongu area. Three of them trace their descent from about the twelfth or thirteenth century, while the fourth in the CankaraNTampalayam claims a title awarded by the Vijayanagar king in about the sixteenth century.

### Gounder Sub-Sects: 64 Kootams

Gounder caste is subdivided into 64 clan groups. All the members of the clan is considered to be Pangalis or parallel relatives. Marriage between parallel relatives is strictly prohibited and is considered to be incestuous. However, a boy can take technically a bride from any of the other 63 clans in the Gounder caste. Similarly a girl is given in marriage to a boy belonging to any of the other 63 clans and is considered to have left her clan of birth in the marriage. Because of this rule, cross cousin marriage was highly encouraged among Gounders and is still common today.

### Educating Gounders:

As an agricultural community, Gounders were largely uneducated until India's independence in 1947. After independence, public education was made available in rural areas. Many Gounders took advantage of the public school system and sent their children to schools hoping to give them eventually a college education and a prestigious job in the Government. As the school standard in the rural area was not very good, only a minor percentage among them could eventually get prestigious professional education and could become doctors, engineers, lawyers etc. Some of them looked for global opportunities for the dear education that they received and migrated to other parts of the world. Most of the Gounders that are in their forties or fifties are first generation of educated persons from the Gounder caste.

Until 1970s the Gounders were treated as forward class in terms of education. Although Gounders owned land, their education level was very poor and it was difficult for them to compete with the educationally forward class castes in getting limited professional seats. In 1970s the Gounders were declared to be a backward community and this opened up more opportunities for higher level education through the reservation system.

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In the last forty years there have been tremendous progress in the Gounder community in education. Many Kongu towns are replete with doctors, lawyers, businessmen etc. from Gounder community due to the educational opportunities. Many educational institutes in the Kongu region are managed by the Gounders.

### Kongu-Americans

Although migration of Gounders to North America started in the early sixties, real opportunities in United States started in mid and late sixties mainly due to Vietnam war. Bleak employment opportunities in India forced many of the first generation of educated gounders to search for employment opportunities in United States. Most of the gounders came to United States to pursue higher education and eventually settled here after getting a job. Slowly the number of Gounders in United States increased and reached a critical mass. The first meeting of Gounders was held in May 1995 in Columbus, Ohio.