CHAPTER - III

ECONOMIC CHANGES

The majority of the Ilavas in Tamilnadu professed arrack distillation traditionally. Some of them also pursued weaving; some others served as soldiers, guards and even as servants to the local petty chiefs. But they did not satisfy with the callings because of meagre earnings. Further the ill-treatment meted out by them from the caste Hindus due to their occupation, induced them to switch over to new occupations. As a result from the beginning of the 20th century majority of them began to desert their interior rural villages of four 'nadu' and 'vattakai' and started to settle in the developing towns and cities of Tamilnadu in order to attain economic prosperity. Those who settled in the developing towns and cities pursued occupations other than their traditional one with an intention of economic stability and new status. The increasing economic prosperity revitalised their aspiration for the elevation in social scale. A thorough change was taken place in their profession and thereby they modernised their community.

I. TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS:

(a) ARRACK DISTILLATION:

Pattanam, Midalam and Malayam division Ilavas were the arrack distillers of South Travancore.1 Zeen-ud-din, a great

1 Neet Record, Vol.9, pp.183, 184.
native Arabic scholar, who lived and worked among the Ilavas in the 16th century describes about their occupation as "to climb the coconut trees, gather the fruit, and extract the juice from its branches, which becomes a fermented liquor of an intoxicating nature". 2 William Logan towards the close of the 19th century says about the profession of Ilavas as "they were the planters of the ancient Hindu constitution, and this character they still to a very large extent retain, as they hold to the present day a practical monopoly of tree climbing and toddy drawing from palm trees". 3 They continued the profession of arrack distillation in Tamilnadu. In view of their hereditary occupation of toddy drawing and distilling liquor, they were known as "Sarayakkara-pillaimars". 4

One of their groups with an expectation of high profit often shifted their professional centres from one place to another. K. Azhakarswamy, seventh descendant from a family thus migrated from the Tambraparni river basin settled in Keezhavalavu in Melur taluq narrated by reciting a folk song with the author about how their ancestors had worked as distillers and renters in different centres. Nondi Karutha Madan and his wife Karuppayi, the ancestors of Azhakarswamy migrated from Tinnevelly in 1700s,

settled at Ramanathapuram and engaged in the profession of distillation. As failed to get the expected gain they shifted their professional centre to Lambalakudi near Thirumayam (at present in Pudukkottai district). In course of time they deserted Lambalakudi also and migrated towards Satturusumharakottai (at present in the Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar district). After the death of Nondi Karutha Madan, Karuppayi with his son Uttaman migrated towards Semmanipatti and where the Semmanipatti Ponkuliyandi Ambalam provided shelter. Uttaman's son Karutha Madan (Second Karutha Madan) in course of time engaged in the traditional profession of arrack distillation and sale and became a famous Kuttakaikarar (renter or abkari contractor). He extended his business to Melur and Sivaganga areas during the reign of Marudhu Brothers of Sivaganga. At present nearly 90 families of his descendants are living at Keezhavalavu and are known as Karutha Madan Kootam (Kuttakaikarar family).

Even though there were a few renters among them, majority were engaged in that calling as coolies under the supervision of a renter upto 1881. The renter took in auction the palmyra palm for the supply of arrack in the district. In

---

5 Interview with K. Azhakarswamy, Keezhavalavu, Melur taluq, dated 22.12.92. Also folk song about Nondi Karutha Madan and his progeny which is still popular among their descendants, living at Keezhavalavu near Melur.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
1881, the modern 'abkari' system was introduced in the British province. According to the modern regulated abkari system the government officials began to put auction the toddy and arrack sales directly to the common people. The renter lost his influence. Ilavas who worked under the renter became jobless. Besides, the economically poor Ilavas were not able to take arrack shops in auction. Thus because of the modern abkari system Ilavas were totally affected. This became one of the major reasons which led to their change of profession.

In different parts of southern Tamilnadu their settlements were called in the name of their profession ie. arrack distillation. In Nattam their settlement was known as Sarayakadamdu. Still in Wuraiur near Tiruchirapalli their streets are known as Melaisarayapattarai street and Keezhasarayapattarai street.

(b) GUARDS:

From early period onwards in Tamilnadu every village had its own kavalkars (guards), so that it could be saved from the hands of marauders and maintained law and order in the villages. They were posted either by the village communities or by the rulers to guard the villages. The purchased title holders ie.

Panikkan or Channan among the Ilavas successfully carried out the work of kaval in the Tinnevelly district. In commutation of their service they were permitted to collect 'taxes' from the people to whom they worked. They were the holders of a guard at Chidambarapuram in the Nanguneri taluq which was extended over the neighbouring villages of Kalakkad, Pattai, Koilpatti, Nangulam, Singampattu and Vijayarajapuram. For this purpose the Travancore rulers issued copper plate grants in A.D.1500-01. They possessed the right of kaval during the British period also. Besides, at Kuttam in the Nanguneri taluq and at Kadaiyam in the Ambasamudram taluq the kaval was in their hands.

It is said that Maravas who supported Veera Pandiya Kattabommu of Panchalamkurichi in his revolt against the British, feared much since he was captured and executed by the British. Hence they roamed the country and engaged in robbing the travellers and looting the villages. As early as 1798 owing to the "notorious profligacy and savageness of their character," the British authorities deprived the Nanguneri Maravas of the kaval rights which they had usurped over the village of Nanguneri and

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p.339.
15 Ibid., p.340.
its dependants and restored the right to its original possessors ie. the Ilavas.\textsuperscript{16} But in 1816 the Maravas returned and ousted them with great savagery and regained their strong hold.\textsuperscript{17}

Ilava guards often faced challenges and threat of the Maravas. Consequently they were not able to continue their kaval right, even though they carried out this calling successfully from centuries back. Ilava guards in certain parts of Ramanathapuram also became the victims of Marava intruders. K. Azhakarswamy, seventh descendant from the family Nondi Karutha Madan, has cited with folk song and explained about their ancestors' sufferings that faced when tried to restore their kaval right. Nondi Karutha Madan worked as guard while he was at Satturusumharakottai after giving up the profession of arrack distillation. But he could not continue that profession because of the threat of the Maravas. That rivalry led to the perfidious killing of Nondi Karutha Madan in the kaval Kuchu (shed) by the Marava rivals using \textit{Vel kampu}\textsuperscript{18} (sharpened stick).

(c) **SOLDIERS:**

In the medieval period Ilavas were largely employed as soldiers by the rulers of Travancore and Malabar. They formed

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{18} Interview with K. Azhakarswamy, Keezhavalavu, Melur; dated 22.12.1992. Also folk song about Nondi Karutha Madan and his progeny which is still prevalent among their descendants, living at Keezhavalavu.
Sword which was given to the Panikkans during the period of the Nayak Queen Mangammal. Now it is under the possession of M. Chelliah Pillai family, Goripalayam, Madurai.
separate companies by themselves in the army. Duarte Barbosa (a Portuguese subject who served his government in Malabar from 1500 to 1516 A.D.) says that "some of them learn the use of arms". 19 Canter Visscher, a Dutch Chaplain at Cochin about 1723 A.D. writing about their service to the state as that "in times of civil war or rebellion the Chegos (Ilavas) are bound to take up arms for the lawful sovereign; and some princes employ them as soldiers on other occasions, if they have not a sufficient force of Nayars." 20 Nagam Aiya quotes as "so late at the end of the eighteenth century, Maharajah Rama Varma of Travancore had a hundred thousands soldiers, Nayars and Chegos armed with bows, spears, swords and battle axe". 21

In Tamilnadu some of the Ilavas rendered their service as soldiers to the Madurai Nayak Queen Mangammal (1689-1706). They were honoured by presenting them with Royal swords and grants by Her Highness in return for their meritorious services in her army. At present one such Royal sword and copper plate in the possession of M. Chelliah Pillai family at Goripalayam in Madurai, are exhibiting their services to Madurai Nayak rulers. One of the forefathers of M. Chelliah Pillai was presented with that Royal

19 Barbosa quoted in K.P. Padmanabha Menon's History of Kerala, p.431.


sword and Copper Plate grant by the Queen Mangammal in the year 1701 A.D.\textsuperscript{22} It is said that some of the Ilavas also worked as soldiers in the army of Marudhu Brothers of Sivaganga.\textsuperscript{23} The Ilavas who were in the royal service were respected and their descendants also respected by the caste Hindus. This respect fetched them social status. Hundreds of Ilava families secured timely elevation, because of the Royal order.

(d) **OTHER PROFESSIONALISTS:**

They were also well versed in medicine, astrology and in the art of \textit{mantras} and \textit{tantras} (incantation and witchcraft). It is said that they worked as healers in the court of Zamindars of Sivaganga in the old Ramanathapuram district, Sivagiri, Sokkampatti, Nelcatteumseval, Tenmalai and Thalaivankottai etc. of the Tinnevelly district.\textsuperscript{24} Even now nearly ten families are working as healers and astrologers at Kandanoor near Karaikudi.\textsuperscript{25}

It is said that a healer named Krishna Panickar lived in a village of Keelarangiyam near Thirupuvanam. He was well versed in healing the wounds by herbal medicines. During the course of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Madurai, Tirupparamkuntram, Matalayam Copper Plate which is in the possession of M. Chelliah Pillai and family, Madurai, dated 1701 A.D.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Sivaganga Palace Archives Palm Leaf Records, bundle No.17, dated 1795.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Interview with P. Chelliah, Vasudevanallur, Tirunelveli Kattabomman district, dated 19.7.1989.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Interview with TR.S. Thirumala Azhaku, Kandanoor, Karaikudi, dated 24.7.1989.
\end{itemize}
the war between the British and Marudu Brothers in 1801 (Poligari
Revolt) the soldiers on both sides were wounded. But the wounded
soldiers of Marudu Brothers had attended the battle field in the
next day because of the treatment given by Krishna Panickar. For
this Marudu Brothers honoured and appointed him in the newly
constructed hospital at Padamattur, near Sivaganga.26 The British
came to know about the speciality of his treatment and surprised.
They desired to kill him otherwise they would be defeated in the
revolt. So they conspired a plot to kill him. As per their
conspiracy Krishna Panickar was killed by them at Padamattur.27

(e) COURT SERVANTS:

Immigrant Ilavas also worked as servants under petty
rulers and local caste heads of Tamilnadu. It is said that about
200 years back they served in the court of Nattam Zamindar
Sarugutontulingama Eruthathu Emdu Lingama Nayak as servants and
were called with the title of 'Servaikarar'.28 Nearly fifteen
Ilava families with the title of 'Servai' living at present at
Nattam, are said to be their descendants.29 In the Melur area
they worked as Kanakkupillai (accountant) under local chieftains.

26 Illasudar, Fortnightly, Sivakasi, dated 1.7.1989, p.15.
27 Ibid.
28 Interview with M. Thankavelu Pillai, Nattam, Dindigul Anna
29 Ibid.
As an instance to this, after the death of Nondi Karutha Madan, Karuppayi migrated towards Semmanipatti where the Ponkuliyandi Ambalam provided shelter to them and also her son Uttaman was appointed as Kanakkupillai. Because of this profession in the Melur area their houses were called as 'Kanakku Veedu'. Besides, they also worked as personal servants to the caste heads of the Piramanalai Kallar.

(f) **WEAVING:**

The immigrant Ilavas also engaged in one of their traditional professions i.e. weaving. Some of them were independent weavers and they worked on their own account. Some others were employed by Brahmin capitalists in the important business of manufacturing rough cloths for export.

---

30 Interview with K. Azhakarswamy, Keezhavalavu, Melur, dated 22.12.1992. Also the folk song about Nondi Karutha Madan and his progeny which is still prevalent among their descendants, living at Keezhavalavu. The Semmanipatti Ambalakarar were the descendants of the Ramanathapuram Raja through an illegal wife. These descendants migrated to Semmanipatti and made marriage contact with the Kallar community. But the Ramanathapuram Raja was a Marava.


33 The Neet Records of Travancore has mentioned, besides toddy tapping, distillation of arrack and sale, as weaving was one of major professions of the Ilavas of the South Travancore. Neet Record, Vol.9, pp.183, 184.

The rich Brahmins of Kallidaikurichi had their brokers in all the important weaving centres of Ambasamudram taluq. They paid money as advance to the Ilava weavers and purchased the finished products at a price which made allowance for the sum advanced plus interest and leaves a margin both for the broker's commission and the settler's profit. In the places like Viravanallur, Sankarankovil (Sankaranainarkoil), Puliangudi, Melapuliangudi, Chintamani, Tirumalainayakanpudukudi etc., they largely engaged in weaving. Viravanallur was the most important weaving centre of the district. The Ilava weavers produced largely Muris (rough cloth with coloured borders) and large quantities were sent to Quilon, Alleppey and other places in the West Coast, through the Brahmin agency. In Kallitaikurichi and Cheranmahadevi the Brahmans had cottage industries on a small scale and employed them to work on the looms. The Ilava workers were able to earn a moderate income. This profession helped them to improve their economic position as well as raise their status in the society to a certain extent.

The Ilava weavers also readily accomodated themselves to the modern technique. When flyshuttle, an industrial revolutionary invention, brought to use in Tamil districts, the

36 Ibid., p.371.
Ilava weavers immediately learnt the art without any aversion or hesitation and adopted it in their weaving centres. Flyshuttles favoured by them were found here and there in the important centres like Kallidaikurichi and Cheranmahadevi of the Ambasamudram taluq.\textsuperscript{37} They increased their production throughout the years through adoption of the modern technique and sold the cloths in cheaper rate. They introduced new designs and patterns in weaving and made more attractive cloths. **Hence their change in weaving technique made the Tinnevelly district as a leading weaving district among the Tamil districts.** But when the weaving calling in the Tinnevelly district affected due to the introduction of power looms 60% of the Ilava weavers migrated to different parts of Tamilnadu.\textsuperscript{38}

Thus the Ilava weavers contributed to the growth of modern designs and patterns in their weaving profession.

II. **CHANGE OF PROFESSION AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION:**

Marava disturbances against their kaval rights, modern abkari system of 1881, establishment of power looms etc. were caused severe blow to their traditional occupations and as a result they were forced to change their calling. It is true through the profession of arrack distillation and sale a section

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p.217.

\textsuperscript{38} Interview with R.M.K. Arumugam, Srivilliputtur, dated 22.06.1989.
among them had earned some money, purchased land and other wealth, but they could not attain the expected social status. From the beginning of the 20th century onwards they intensely felt that the continuance of the traditional profession of arrack distillation and sale would lead to their social degradation and also as a result their goal of achieving of higher social status in the Tamil society would be remained unfruitful. After taking into account of the above said reasons, they switched over to other occupations of different nature which include agriculture, petty trade, tailoring etc. 39 On the other side, a vast majority among them deserted their interior villages and began to settle in the developing towns and cities of Tamilnadu and seek employment in modern industry and trade. This measure helped them gradually to attain their economic transformation.

The economic transformation occurred among them due to the following:

(1) **AGRICULTURE:**

In order to avoid the unemployment and also get rid of the sufferings as an immediate remedy they turned to agriculture and a good number among them worked as agricultural coolies. Their women were also engaged in rice pounding and earned as their men.

The Census Report of 1921 showing the distributional pattern of their occupations as follows:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste and Occupation</th>
<th>Number per 1,000 workers engaged on each occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ilavan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural labourers</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators: Owners and tenants</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddy drawers and sellers</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice pounders</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gradually through this hard profession of agriculture too a section among them could improve their economic position to a certain extent. Ilavas of Sivagalai village in Srivaikuntam taluq is an instance to this where no one is possessing the land below the worth of one lakh rupee.  

(2) MILL AND FACTORY WORK:

In the beginning of 20th century Madura Coats Mills were

41 Interview with V. Pandaraswami, Sivagalai, Tirunelveli Kattabomman district, dated 22.12.1991.
established at Vickramasingapuram, Tuticorin and Madurai. By using this opportunity a group of Ilavas after deserting their interior rural villages sought employment in the Madura Coats Mills. In due course these places became their main concentrated centres of population.\textsuperscript{42} In the Vickramasingapuram cotton spinning mill a great part of the workers were drawn from this community only.\textsuperscript{43} It is said that still also in Vickramasingapuram their life is fully depended upon that mill.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, when the Loyal Textile Mill at Kovilpatti was established in 1920s a section of them migrated from their regions to Kovilpatti area and sought employment in that mill.\textsuperscript{45} Besides, a few among them sought employment in the Lakshmi Mills at Kovilpatti, T.V.S. Spinning Mill at Nanguneri, Gomathi Mills, Viravanallur Co-operative Spinning Mill, Melur etc.

In Kovilpatti and Sankarankovil a few among them are the owners of match factories and a considerable number of this caste

\textsuperscript{42} Their main centres of population in Tamilnadu are: (a) Madurai (b) Vickramasingapuram, (c) Tuticorin, (d) Kovilpatti, (e) Rajapalayam, (f) Srivilliputtur, (g) Viravanallur, (h) Kottar, (i) Tirunelveli Pettai, (j) Tirunelveli, (k) Navinipatti.


\textsuperscript{44} Interview with A. Parpanatha Pillai, Vickramasingapuram, dated 7.9.1992.

\textsuperscript{45} Interview with S. Velumayil, Kovilpatti, V.O. Chidambaranar district, dated 15.9.1992.
people are working in their match factories. In Sivakasi town nearly 400 members of this caste are employed both as daily coolies and monthly salaried workers in the match factories, fire work factories and Litho Offset printing press.\(^{46}\)

(3) Migration to Foreign Countries:

Ilavas who settled in the surrounding rural villages of Thiruppatur, Singampunari, Devakottai etc. served as servants under the Nattukottai Chetties. As the Nattukottai Chetties were engaged in overseas trade, they also got an opportunity to go to abroad like Malaysia, Singapore, Burma, Ceylon etc. and serve them. It is said that about 750 Ilava families migrated to these foreign countries.\(^{47}\) As a result they attained economic stability and started new business in their native country after returning from abroad.

(4) Plantation Work:

Towards the closing period of the 19\(^{th}\) century due to poverty and unemployment a group among them from the surrounding areas of Srivilliputtur and Rajapalayam migrated to Munnar in Kerala, where they employed in the tea and coffee estates which is a new profession to them. In the Munnar estate they worked as

\(^{46}\) Interview with N. Dinamani, Sivakasi, dated 3.11.1989.
\(^{47}\) Interview with R. Sethu Pillai, Burma Bazaar, Tiruchirapalli, dated 25.7.1989.
Kanganis (jobbers). They are claiming that they are responsible for the creation of the estates in Munnar. Their descendants who are living in the surrounding areas of Rajapalayam and Srivilliputtur, are nicknamed as 'Kangani' families.

(5) TRADE:

With an endeavour of achieving economic stability, after realizing the economic change and advancement of their fellow caste Nadars, the Ilavas who settled in the developing towns and cities turned their attention towards different kinds of trade. With the assistance of the Christian missionaries, Nadars secured small land holdings and intensively cultivated garden crops. In the process of time many Nadars, those who earned income from agriculture were diverted and invested on trade, money lending etc. Many of the developing towns of southern Tamilnadu became their trading centres monopolised with the bulk of trade. The rise of the 'Nadar business class' had given a new sense of self-respect among that community because of the increase of wealth and consequently claimed for social honours and ritual privileges on an equal footing with caste Hindus. But the Ilavas, themselves without the assistance of any helping agency and with an endurance of strenuous and resolute work, sought for the economic change and advancement. Ilavas, those who engaged in

petty trade, developed their trade into a large scale due to their newly grown skill in that profession. Ilavas of Kottar at first engaged in petty trade and in due course they developed it to a large scale. They also engaged in the rice and paddy business. Within a short span of time they became the owners of rice mill, big and small rice mill boilers.\textsuperscript{49} At present on both the sides of the Azhagarkoil road in Melur, they are engaged in gold jewellery business and few among them also involved in banking and money lending.\textsuperscript{50} Similarly in the towns like Srivilliputtur and Dindigul they became the leading traders of gold and diamond jewellery due to their skill in that trade. Also a few among them in the cities like Tirunelveli, Madurai, Tiruchirapalli, Madras are doing gold jewellery business. In addition because of the business skill a few among them rose to the position of mosaic industrialists, automobile spare parts shop owners, hotel owners, transport owners, etc.

(6) \textbf{GOVERNMENT SERVICE:}

Towards the close of the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century a section among them began to get modern education and also entered into the government service. Especially Ilavas who settled in the developing towns acquired modern education and are


\textsuperscript{50} Interview with S. Guruswamy, Azhagarkoil Road, Melur, dated 22.12.1992.
working as teachers, government officials, technical staff etc. In the name of government job an untouchable who is in government service can approach the houses of a Caste Hindus and also even the house of a Brahmin. Thus by entering in the government service they raised their status as well as the economic stability.

(7) CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT:

With the aim of creating economic change among the masses, after independence the Tamilnadu government organised a Co-operative movement and encouraged for conducting trade and different work by organising Co-operative Societies. With an intention of economic change Ilavas started industrial Co-operative Society and Weavers Co-operative Society in their centres. An example to this they conduct such societies in Viravanallur, Mugavur near Rajapalayam, Srivilliputtur etc. Through their Thiruvalluvar Weaver’s Co-operative Society in Viravanallur they market all types of cloths such as sarees, towels, bed sheets, lungis etc. In Srivilliputtur, their co-operative industrial society named Saraswathi Hand Pounding Society functions with the majority of women workers. They supply hand pounded rice to the government hospitals. Also, they prepare bread, dhal etc. and supply it to the government Harijan

In addition to the industrial society, they run one weaver's co-operative society named Sidhi Vinayagar Weaver's Society. This society functions with 50 looms, by providing employment to their caste members. Their participation in the co-operative movement helped to improve the economic condition of the poor section of their caste.

In the Tirunelveli district a few Ilavas continue their traditional calling of weaving. According to the Census Report of India 1961, among all classes of weavers they formed a ratio of 4.2% in that district. In Madurai some others are engaged in weaving turkey towels especially "jacaud" design.

Due to poverty and unemployment some of them migrated from the Karaikudi and Devakottai area and are working in the Madras city as masons and mosaic contractors.

Some of them are working as agricultural coolies. It is said that throughout Tamilnadu 70% of this caste people are living in different villages and a section among them are engaged in mat weaving, beedi manufacturing, cattle herding etc., and their

53 Ibid.
monthly income is varying from Rs.75 to 125. In Wuraiur near Tiruchirapalli their economic condition is very poor.

Ilavas living at Sirvilliputtur, Rajapalayam, Kottar, Madurai, surrounding areas of Melur etc., are economically advanced than the others. Generally the Ilavas once lived under despised condition, acute poverty and in lower strata of the society, improved their economic position in the Tamil society. As a result of the economic transformation another phase of social change occurred among them.