Chapter - I
CHAPTER - I

SOCIAL HIERARCHY AND STRATIFICATION

The social setting of Tamils witnessed caste segregation, economic disparities and religious anomalies. Based upon varna system the Indo-Aryans divided the society into four classes viz; the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. With the coming of the Indo-Aryans into South India, the already existing indigenous divisions and subdivisions based upon occupation of the society came to be amalgamated with these four-fold divisions. Yet this Indo-Aryan system did not completely overcome the existing class structure in the Tamil region. In the colonial rule the four-fold system which mingled with the social divisions of the Tamils came to be classified into three primary divisions, the Brahmins, the caste – Hindus and the Depressed Classes.¹

The Brahmins

Among the three major divisions, the Brahmins who were in upper strata of the society occupied a privileged position in the Tamil society. The Brahmins were only two per cent of the Tamil population and resided at a restricted area in every village and towns called agravaram. They were noted for the highly orthodox practices and for the supreme authority in religious literature. They were divided into a number of endogamous groups and were not evenly settled down in Tamil Nadu. Nearly half of the Tamil Brahmins lived in the three districts of Tamil Nadu namely Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Tirunelveli. Thanjavur was considered to be the citadel of Brahmin community. About nine per cent of the total population of Thanjavur was

¹. Pillay, K.K., A Social History of Tamils, pp. 226 – 234.
Brahmins. In Tamil Nadu, there were two broad categories of Brahmins namely Iyers and Iyengars and among the occupational Tamil Brahmins there were three divisions namely, the vedic Brahmins, domestic Brahmins and temple priests. The temple priests played a remarkable role in the society. They regulated religious life and mingled with the people in the day to day activities.

The co-operation between the British administrators and the Brahmins was nowhere hearty and intimate than in the management of the rich temples. Placed in high and intimate favour with the British officials, the Brahmins were able to influence and strengthen the chains of caste on which hung their entire system of socio and religious domination.

The reorganization of the administrative system in the nineteenth century gave a lot of opportunities to the Brahmins to improve their standard of life. They became elite and administrative groups of the Tamil society. Due to their economic and political status they acquired landed property. In course of time, they occupied a reputed position in the social setup. They led a luxurious and convenient life at home while the other caste people were tilling the soil or engaged in trade activities. The Brahmins gave their lands to the non-Brahmin tenants for lease and they also cultivated the lands with the help of the

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labourers. Thus the Brahmins got income from the landed property and temple assets.

The Brahmins who occupied good position in the society made their children to get all kinds of education. As a result they got postings in the administration, and their exodus to towns started. Between 1864 and 1880, in the entire Madras Presidency, 59 per cent of the children who had completed their secondary education and 63 per cent of university graduates were Brahmins. As a result of their predominance in the field of education field, it was found that from 1850s certain Brahmin families were monopolizing key posts in government. Further as they were considered an elite class, they were involved in the political activities and influenced the masses highly. All the socio-politico and religious activities were dominated by the Brahmins which were highly responsible for the aggravation of the caste system in Tamil Nadu. The growth of anti-Brahmanism compelled the Brahmins to seek anonymity, which only large and amorphous metropolitan crowds could provide.

**Dominant Castes**

The caste – Hindus or non-Brahmin high castes were placed next to the Brahmins in the social strata. Among them, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettiar, Naidus, Naicks and Kammalas gained great influence over the

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They were called non-Brahmin or caste-Hindus. With the expansion of the education system after 1890s the educated non-Brahmin middle class migrated towards Madras, the centre of political and administrative activities, to fulfill its aspiration of sharing power and influence with the Brahmins on a more equitable basis. A group of non-Brahmin landlords were able to maintain their dominant position in rural areas. But in cities, the over representation of Brahmins in government posts, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, accentuated the difference between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and added to latter’s frustration. It is one of the main reasons for the development of a political awareness among non-Brahmins, initially those belonging to the forward castes like Vellalas. The early non-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu was more elite based than in Maharashtra with the relatively high-caste Vellalas and other non-Brahmin landlords and professionals from Telugu and Malayalam speaking regions who were able to confront the Brahmins on their own footing, increasingly without having to build a mass movement. The Vellala was highly respected and influential caste among the non-Brahmin caste-Hindus. There were several categories of the Vellalas, such as Tondaimandalam Vellalas (Saiva Vellalas), Karkarta Vellalas, Nanchilnadu Vellalas, Kongu Vellalas etc., Invariably they were land owners and cultivators. The Vellalas and other communities of the

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same status, most of whom were rich and respected land owning families in rural areas, were treated as ordinary Shudras in the cities. The varnashrama dharma, the ancestral principle of hierarchy had been imposed again in a modern urban context.¹⁶

Mudaliars were another example of the Indian penchant for diversity in unity. There were the Arcot Mudaliars, Vellore Mudaliars, Poonamalle Mudaliars and Senguntha Mudaliars. They were all grouped under the generic name of Vellalar at one time or another. In Tamil Country Vellalar was the common name for people who were engaged in agriculture. They were next to Brahmins in hierarchical terms, though the Arcot Mudaliars considered themselves decidedly superior to Brahmins, perhaps they distinguished themselves in education and generally in Anglophilia. It was a location (Vellore) or occupation (Senguntha- Silk weaving) that made for subdivisions in course of time.

Mudaliar is a term that means the first- rank persons, the leader, and the chief. This community is not intimidated by the airs of those above or the assertions of those below. But they are subject to the same influences that impinge on all communities in India.

The Mudaliars were highly cultured and staunch saivaites. One group among them tilled the fields with sweat of their labour. Another group employed labour to work and the lands owned by them. They were also given to intellectual pursuits; saints, spiritualists, chieftains, administrators and thinkers rose from their ranks. The social transformation that took place in this community over the years can be witnessed at the life histories of the outstanding figures it has produced. Ariyanatha Mudaliar was in the field of martial arts, strategy and tactics. Considered the Patriarch of Thondaimandala Mudaliar, he was the Thalavai (commander- in-Chief and prime minister) of four consecutive Nayak Kings.

When the Justice Party was formed in 1917 a number of Mudaliars joined in it. When the party took power in Madras, P.T.Rajan from Mudaliar caste became a minister. He also held the post of Premier of the Madras Presidency for some time. S. Muthaiah Mudaliar was responsible for the first communal Government Order which provided reservation and employment in Government. S.Gurusamy was next in rank to Periyar E.V.Ramaswamy in the “Self Respect” Movement. He was a well-known editor of the “Viduthalai” newspaper who worked incessantly to remove the cobwebs of superstition in Tamil Nadu. In the twentieth century Thondaimadal Mudaliars were included in the list of forward communities.¹⁷

‘Vellala’ the word in Tamil denotes ‘cultivator’. Simultaneously it also denotes a major caste spread over all the areas of the Tamil country ie., Tondaimandalam, Cholamandalam, Kongu Mandalam and Pandya Mandalam and were subdivided on that territorial basis, and then further divided into numerous sub – castes. The outstanding feature of this caste is that the members who are large – scale landowners and cultivators whose ownership goes several centuries back in time.¹⁸

Eventhough the centralised political power in Tamil country weakened from the fourteenth century, due to alien invasions, the aliens associated themselves with the indigenous elite groups – the Vellalas. The seventeenth century mandala satakam poems (5 or 7 of which are devoted to extolling the past glories of Vellalas) are interpreted as “ideological statements of an ancient and continuing, though challenged, dominance of Tamil


Vellalas”.¹⁹ A series of inscriptions at Vikramasingapuram, Courtallam, Kanyakumari etc., point to yet another Vellala family associated with Government in Tirunelveli principality.²⁰ Vadamalaiyappa Pillai, a Karkatta Vellala from Kayanur in Madurai district is mentioned as Karyattu-k-Karttar (agent for administration) to Tirumal Nayak. His functions include collection of revenue and maintenance of law and order. Renovation and construction of temples at Tentirupperai, Tirukkolur, Sankarankoil, Kanyakumari, Tiruchendur and Courtallam are attributed to him. His son Tirunalai-K-Kolundu Pillai was Karyattu-K-Karttar for Chokkanathaya Nayak.

The “Vellalas-as-administrators” motif recurs often in the family and estate histories of the numerous Palayappattus and Zamins in Tirunelveli area. They are Chokkampatti, Sivagangai, Ettaiyapuram, Panjalamkurichi, Ramanathapuram etc. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Vellalas were considered a powerful local caste.²¹ Moreover in the hostilities between Telugu and Marava Poligars, the Vellalas were uniformly sought out by both blocs for key ministerial assignments. Thus the Vellalas played a dominant role in various periods at various levels.²² The Saiva Vellalas known for vegetarianism occupied a decent place in the society. They had good education and entered the government jobs in various categories. Besides they engaged in ploughing operation which fetched them a considerable income from agriculture and increased their economic and social status on a par with the


Brahmins. They established their individuality and identity in their social ceremonies by not inviting the Brahmins, the usual practice of other caste people. The other Vellalas lived throughout Tamilnadu but they were not maintaining the status equal to that of Saiva Vellalas in the society.

Business Community

The Chettiars or Chettis next to the Vellala caste were involved in trade and commercial activities. There were numerous sub-divisions among them. Of them, the most significant and influential groups were Nattukottai Chettis, Beri Chettis, Komatti Chettis and Vaniya Chettis. The Nattukottai Chettis were the most enterprising commercial community of Tamil Nadu. They were mostly traders and money lenders. They are known for pious and charitable activities. They contributed a considerable share of their income to the endowments of various temples. The Beri Chettis had origin later than the Nattukkotai Chettis. They also claim themselves to be vaisyas and are living in Kumbakonam region. There are both vegetarians and non-vegetarians among the Beri Chettis. Komatti Chettis, known for a mercantile class were settled mostly in Salem, Coimbatore and Madurai. The Vaniya Chettis, the popular traders in oil, used to carry on business in oil seeds. They pressed the oil seeds and produced oil of all varieties. They made a remarkable contribution to the commercial prosperity besides the agricultural advancement. They were well known for their fragility.

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The Shanars or Nadars, settled excessively in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Madurai and Ramnad districts. They were considered as inferior class people. Their main occupation was toddy drawing, palmyra cultivation and sale of the goods produced from the palmyra tree.

They cultivated and climbed the palmyra palm from which they drew the sweet juice which they turned into coarse country sugar to eke out a living. Caldwell described them “as belonging to the highest division of the lowest classes or the lowest of the middle classes”. They were in a social limbo between the Sudras and the outcaste untouchables. The high castes contemptuously called them as Shanars. On the representation of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam formed in 1910 for the welfare of this caste, the Government of Madras chose to recognize them as Nadars instead of Shanars and issued an order to that effect in July 1921.

They were considered a ‘half- polluting’ caste and though free from some of the restrictions placed them still lower classes, they had to keep spatial distance from the high castes. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to use foot-wear or carry water-pots on their hips. They could not milk cows or use balance to weigh tobacco and other articles. They could not build houses above one storey nor tile them. Their women were not allowed to use fine jewellery. To mark their degradation the women were forbidden to wear anything whatever about their waist but had to go about clad in a piece of coarse cloth called mundu stretching from waist to knees exposing their


32. Government of Madras, G.O.No. 785, Law (General) Department, 7 July 1921.
breasts. Several other very ordinary conveniences and comforts were denied to
them.33

Further the government harassed them by the extraction of several
unjust burden including taxes and levies. The most oppressive of these taxes
was the talai irai or pool – tax levied on all the male members of a family,
living and dead. When some of the families migrated to the neighboring district
to avoid this tax, the relations of these families were forced to pay the tax on
their behalf. From the poll tax the Nadar community suffered more than the
others. The government also extracted taxes from the palm trees from which
they drew the sweet juice for their meager existence.34 There were numerous
other taxes like irary-panam and velai padivu. The feudal chieftains extracted
from their lower caste tenants whom they could evict at will or even kill. Their
using of head-gear, umbrellas with handles and the growing of moustache
needed specific permission on payment of a prescribed fee.35 “There was a tax
for the hair one grew and for the breasts of the woman called a breast-tax”.36
The Nadar women were not allowed to wear jackets to cover their body.

The inhuman manner in which these taxes were extracted made
the tax collector a terror to the Nadars. The concessions made from time to time
by benign rulers were often overlooked, and physical torture was applied to
extract not merely dues but even advances; some-times far above the fixed
rates. Short fire-locks were fixed on the ears of the ‘offending’ men who had to
stand with them for hours in the hot sun suffering excruciating pain till the tax
was paid. In the absence of the men, the women were tortured by heavy wooden


34. Agur, C.M., History of the Protestant Church in Travancore, Madras, 1903, p.151.

35. Sreedhara Menon, A., Social and Cultural History of Kerala, Delhi, 1979, p. 78.

rice-pestles being twisted into their hair or by making them stand in a bent position with heavy stones placed on their backs.\[37\]

Socially degraded and economically exploited, the Nadars lived in a state of fear, humiliated and despised until the middle of the nineteenth century when social and economic reforms of far-reaching results were introduced due to the influence of the British who had come to play a vital role in shaping the affairs of the Nadars.

Not much later, the Nadars initiated their century-long struggle against the degrading custom of partial nakedness of women in deference to the savarna castes. Known as the 'Breast-cloth controversy', the struggle of the Nadars during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, demonstrated the emerging political consciousness of the changing order. The Nadar’s struggle for social acceptance in the early nineteenth century expanded quickly to cover more and more areas of civil society including the right to education, which in turn lead to diversification of occupations.\[38\]

As a result, they could not tolerate this inhuman practice of the higher caste people which made the Nadars fight against social discrimination and to turn towards Christian missionaries in order to get social status and privileges in the society. Thus the religious conversion took place in large scale in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and the Nadars started studying western education and adopted the western style in life.\[39\] The remaining Hindu Nadars took up trade as lucrative occupation. By nature both Christian and Hindu Nadars were hard working, business minded and highly reliable and due to these qualities they captured a covetable place in the social ladder. In the

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beginning of the twentieth century they were generally considered as an affluent business community.  

**Functional Caste**

The artisan castes were a homogenous group constituting not less than one tenth of the total population. They were called Kammalas and Viswakarmas, supposed to have descended from Viswakarma, the architect among gods. They believe that they are even superior to Brahmins. They also call themselves as Acharis and they claim knowledge of the Vedas. The five divisions among them are goldsmith (tattan), brass-smith (kannan), carpenter (tachchan), stonemason (kal tachchan) and blacksmith (kollan or karuman). They are called ‘panchalal.’ The goldsmiths are not having the practice of intermarriage with the kollan or karuman unlike the rest of others are doing. They wear the holy thread and call themselves ‘Vishwa Brahmins.’ They maintain a higher place in the social scale but they scattered throughout the Tamil Nadu in meager strength and their services are highly indispensable and useful to the society.

Thus the non-Brahmin caste – Hindu community rendered a significant role not only in the agrarian activities but also in commercial and artisan works. Each caste enjoyed a greater measure of unity than the non-Brahmin caste – Hindus as a whole, although most of the major ones are themselves sub-divided. In fact, there are a lot of socio-economic disparities within each; but they set aside their differences when they began to resist the

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monopoly of Brahmins in all spheres. The non-Brahmin caste—Hindus were numerically stronger than the Brahmins but lagged behind Brahmins in the race for prosperity, power, and wealth. In 1871 it was also evident in the Census Report that the government jobs were monopolised by the Brahmins. Further it was noted that no non-Brahmin caste—Hindu was elected to the Legislative Council of Madras from 1882 to 1917.

Mukkulathor:

The Kallars, the Maravas and the Agamudyars collectively known as ‘Thevars’ and ‘Mukkulathors’ belonged to a warrior group. The names of the three communities reflect occupational characteristics: Kallars are professional deviant’s robbers; Maravars are warriors and soldiers, and Agamudiyars are largely cultivating castes. Both Kallars and Maravars have been divided into endogamous sub-divisions which correspond with territorial sub-divisions. The Kallars were known for martiality and ferocious nature. Their cultural valorization of heroism and martial honour was highly conducive to the corporate control of the means of violence, coercion, and local authority. Independent Kallar polities-Lilliputian in size organized by lineage and affiliation into regional assemblies of nadus (nattu)-controlled the arid

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44. Rajaraman, P., _op.cit_, pp.21-22.

45. Veeramani, K., _op.cit_, p.4.


47. Government of Madras, G.O. No. 2233, Judicial Department, 10 September 1915.


tracts to the immediate west and northeast of Madurai. They were divided into many sub-castes, known as Esenattu Kallars, or Terkattiyar in Thanjavur, Nattu Kallars in Ramnad district and Visanganattu Kallars in Tiruchirappalli district which reveals the fact that they comprise the districts of Tirunelveli, Ramnad, Tiruchirappalli, Pudukkottai, Madurai and Thanjavur.

The Maravas were either soldiers in the Poligar's armies or Kavalkars (watch and ward) in both sircar and zamin territories. They were in control of the judicial administration too. This responsibility was particularly entrusted with the Maravas in the southern districts of Ramnad, Tirunelveli and Madurai, and with the Kallars in the areas North of Madurai and south of Tiruchirappalli. According to this system, the duty of the kavalkar was to protect the property, to see that there was no theft of food grains, and maintenance of law and order for the smooth functioning of the village system. When the Madras Presidency was formed, they found that the kaval chiefs had assumed all powers and were running parallel governments, depriving the authorities of powers. After a long consideration, the Kaval system was abolished by the Government in 1816. But actual stoppage could not be implemented.

In 1894, in the Dindigul area the first challenge was thrown to the Kallars by one Ammayappa Kone, a village munissif of Usilampatty, to Karuppa Thevar, the Kaval Chief of that area. The Kallars of 40 villages united together. For this purpose a fund was created. For the first time, the Kallars

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had to contribute a little to safeguard their interests. To safeguard and develop the language one Pandithurai Thevar established the Tamil Sangam on 24 May, 1901. The objective of the Tamil Sangam was to revive the glory of Tamil. He said that the revival of the Pandya legacy was the duty of the Mukkulathors.  

In 1911, the Kallars of Thanjavur under the leadership of Uma Maheswaran Pillai established the Karanthai Tamil Sangam, with the financial assistance of the Kallars around the Thanjavur. Kallars were interested in social reform for their community. They started a Sangam called 'Indirakula Athipar' and a journal called 'Kallar Koman' around 1914. At Nanguneri there was a society registered called 'Maravar Sangam': Some influential Maravas in the Nanguneri taluk are called Aru-Pangu Nattu Maravas i.e. belonging to six villages. Most of them depended on Kaval fees for their livelihood. As Kaval fee ran into problems, a section of the Maravars of Nanguneri Taluk who took up evil ways of living by committing crimes was declared a criminal tribe under the criminal Tribes Act in 1919. Hence, some respectable Maravas had decided in 1927 to reclaim the erring man in the community and to uplift the community as a whole by imparting proper education to the younger generation and to make the Maravas as responsible members of the society. This was followed by the ‘Maravar Sangam’ on 6 June, 1929 by the Raja of Ramnad. The objective of this Sangam was the development of Maravas. The Madras Presidency Agamudyar Sangam was started by Sathiah Servai on 17 January, 1932, with the objective of service to Agamudyars.

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57. Padmanabha Ayyar, V.S., A Short Account of the Tinnevelly District, Tinnevelly, 1933, pp.40 – 41.
In 1932, R.M. Rackappa Thevar established Rajapalayam Maravar Sangam. The Sangam was functioning in an orderly way. On the same model, Usilamptti Piramalai Kallar Youth Sangam served from 1932. A meeting of the few important people was convened at Madras by Muthiah Thevar, a businessman in May 1933. Many important persons including the crown prince of Ramnad, Rajaram Pandian, met and started the All India Mukkulathor Sangam on 22 January, 1934. In the first meeting, they passed a resolution that the three communities must have inter-marriages. They also resolved to operate branch offices in all centers dominated by them, such as Rajapalayam, Srivilliputhur, Usilampatti, Periyakulam, Uthamapalayam, etc. The objective of this organization was ethnic identity. One Sivanadi Servai played a major role in this meeting.58

The Vanniyars were agricultural turned militant caste. They settled mostly in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, and in Pondicherry. Almost eighty percent of them are engaged in agrarian activities. Vanniyar is a generic name for a large number of castes. They formed twenty-one per cent in Chengleput, twenty-six per cent in North Arcot, thirty-three per cent in South Arcot, nine per cent in Tiruchirappalli and twenty-four per cent in Salem.59 A Tamil proverb has it that Palli matures into Padayachi, Padyachi into Goundan and Goundan into Naicken. However, in their attempts at caste mobility they forged a common identity and formed a horizontal stretch.

Their earliest attempt on social mobility was in 1833, when the Pallis in Pondicherry claimed that they were Vanniyar and not a low caste. The administration turned down their claim stating that the Hindu law did not refer


to the Vanniyar at all.\textsuperscript{60} Their subsequent attempts were at least four pronged. At first, during the 1871 census the representatives of the caste petitioned the government for classifying it as Kshatriyas. The census superintendent listed the Vanniyars as one of the many Sudra castes in the south. Secondly, the Vanniyars claim their social status by citing various works. In 1872 Munusami Pillai’s \textit{Jathi Sankragaram} showed that the Pallis of the south were descendants of the fire races (Agnikulas) of the Kshatriyas. In 1891 T.Aiyakannu Nayakar’s \textit{Vannikula Vilakkam}, claimed the Vanniyars as Kshatriyas, and in 1907, T. Varadappa Nayakar’s \textit{Varna Dharpanam} connected the Vanniya caste with the ancient Pallava Kings.\textsuperscript{61}

Thirdly, the Vanniyars formed their caste associations. The Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam founded in Madras in 1888 was a high watermark in Vanniyar’s mobility attempts.\textsuperscript{62} Among other things, it helped to create a strong esprit de corps among members of the caste in various parts of the Presidency, and was instrumental in establishing schools, chattrams (choultries), and the publication of a newspaper, \textit{Agnikuladittan} (the sun of Agnikulam) since 1908.

Fourthly, the Vanniyars worked for better self-perception. The Gazetteer of the South Arcot district noted that they were “tending gradually to approach the Brahmanical standard of social conduct. This meant that they discouraged adult marriage, meat-eating, widow remarriage, and also actively repressed open immorality or other social sins. In 1903, the representatives of the caste in thirty four villages in South Arcot district had bound themselves in writing under penalty of excommunication, to refrain from the practice of marrying two


\textsuperscript{61} Radhakrishnan, P., ‘Vanniyars and Social Mobility’ in \textit{The New Indian Express}, 2 February 2003, p. 15.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Dalit Voice}, 1 September 1989.
wives, and of allowing a woman to marry again during the lifetime of her first husband. Some of the caste members took to calling themselves Vanniyakula Kshatriyas or Agnikula Kshatriyas, and others even declared that they were Brahmins. They even wore the sacred thread, tied their cloths in the Brahman fashion and became vegetarians.⁶³

In this connection M.A. Manickavelu Naicker was the first Vanniyar who got an opportunity to make a resolution in the Madras Legislative Council in 1931 recommending for the Labour Department to improve the condition of the Vanniyars.⁶⁴ Responding to the Vanniyar’s demands, the census eventually returned them as “Vanniyan (Vanniyakula Kahatriya)” in 1931. Their Movement from 1915 to 1927 was against Brahmin dominance in education and employment and were involved in the backward class movement from 1927 to 1947 against forward non-Brahmin movement. Though in 1947, as a result of the Vanniyar’s assiduous campaign the government offered them a small share in government employment.⁶⁵

**Depressed Classes**

Among the non-Brahmins in general, the Depressed classes were numerically strong. The Depressed class people were given the lowest rank in the social ladder. They were engaged in soldiering, production of war-related materials and maintenance of war -machinery among other things. Elimination of the numerous little kings and petty chieftains went hand in hand with the elimination of thousands of jobs for men generally of the Depressed Classes. The mass of lower caste men, returning from war-stimulated industries, textile manufactures, temple-related artisanship, independent cultivations through

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semi-natural exigencies, were entering into various types of agrarian servitudes, under the Brahmin–Vellala landowners spread over the region or the dominant communities of the plains, fast finding their own niches within the emerging region-wide caste/class hierarchy. Thus the depressed classes became labourers in agriculture and other public works.

They were called by different names such as Panchamas, Pariahs, Untouchables, Adi-dravidas and the Fifth Varna. Since 1922 they have been officially called Adi-Dravidas. In 1933 Gandhi called them Harijans. The term Scheduled caste was first used by the Simon Commission. They were so called partly because of racial, partly of religious and partly as matter of custom.

The Depressed Classes consisted of nine endogamous castes known as Pariahs, Koravas, Chakkiliyas, Kuluvas, Valluvas, Madigas, Malas, Pallas and Semmas. Numerically they were around 86,00,000 and formed one fifth of the total population of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. They inhabited in all the districts of Tamil Nadu. Among them the Pallas and Pariahs were notable laborers who resided in every village. The Pallas constitute 21 per cent of the Depressed Class population in Tamil Nadu, while the other groups such as

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Pariahs and Chakiliyas account for 59 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.\textsuperscript{73} The Pallars are ‘mountain people’ who settled in plains. David Ludden remarked that the primitive Pallar cultivators preferred—fed subservient status in irrigated villages to their precarious independence in the hills or plains.\textsuperscript{74} S.R.Lushington, the first district collector of Tirunelveli found them enterprising and noted their anxiety in getting early emancipation: “Despite the scantly means of subsistence, the Pallas in their eagerness to obtain relief from affliction in bondage, usually contracted their wants to the mere preservation of their lives with an exception that the accumulation of their savings might enable them to purchase freedom at not a distant future.”\textsuperscript{75}

The Pariahs and Pallas were found working in the muddy paddy fields and living in segregated neighbourhoods as untouchable outcastes, when the British conducted land survey toward the closet of the eighteenth century. Pallas were agricultural serfs of landlords of the dominant castes until 1843, the year in which serfdom was abolished in India. In Thanjavur, they were attached to Brahmin households and in Tirunelveli to Vellalar land holdings. A Palla could opt for any other work. A run away Palla could always be coerced to return to his master. The Palla agricultural serfs received their daily wages in grain and gifts on special occasions. Their work was also more arduous, for men and women performed practically the whole work of grain cultivation of a village.\textsuperscript{76} The compiler of Thanjavur district gazetteer recorded the condition of the Pallas at the beginning of the twentieth century: “Now, as then, the Pannaiyal is usually paid in grain and not in money; he was given presents on festive occasions and was often in debt beyond recall to his landowner. Moreover,

\textsuperscript{73} Sathyanathan Clarke, \textit{Dalits and Christianity}, New Delhi, 1999, p.65.

\textsuperscript{74} David Ludden, \textit{Peasant History in South India}, Delhi, 1989, p.1.


when an estate is sold, the ‘right’ of the landowner over the Panniyal (i.e. the debt due by him) was often also transferred in the document which transfers the ownership of the land.”

The life of Depressed Class people was one of ignorance, misery and servitude. The daily life and living conditions of the Depressed Classes were extremely pathetic. The cheri or slum, the living place of the Depressed Class was at outskirts of a considerable distance from the habitation places of the upper castes and it did not have even the basic facilities and amenities. They were not allowed to leave the area-interment camp- without the permission of the upper castes, who policed the boundaries of the camp with physical force and also with the ideology of purity-pollution. Like aborigines and animals they led their lives under unhygienic conditions. Thus, the Depressed Classes were ghettoized in space, a physical and cultural confinement within a territorial area that was stigmatized by the upper castes.

The use of public wells, tanks and roads was prohibited to the Depressed Classes. They had to draw drinking water from stinking muddy unhygienic pools. They were not permitted to oil or comb their hair. The village barbers services were denied to them. They had to dress themselves only in rags and were prohibited from christening their children with names commonly used by the higher castes. They were forbidden to take up any profession or occupation other than scavenging and other menial tasks.


78. Festschrift Committee Prof. G. Thangavelu, *op.cit.*, p.3.


The principle of untouchability and its attendant forms of segregation and separation was called the “great grandfather of apartheid.” It is identified as a precursor to the institutionalized and deeply entrenched system of apartheid. It was carried too far in the observance of what was known as distance pollution. J.H.Hutton observed that several caste-Hindus were regarded as polluted by the proximity of the members of the depressed classes and so were not allowed to approach Hindu temples. Among the caste-Hindus, the Brahmins, who belonged to the priestly class were permitted to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The people belonging to the next lower rung viz., Vellalas, Mudalis and others were allowed to approach the steps in front of the garbhagraham for devotional acts like reciting Vedic mantras and prostrating in front of the deities. When the deity was in procession during the brahmotsava (the grand annual festival) they were asked to stand 100 cubits’ away from the idol of the deity. Violations were considered to be ominous. To ward off such an evil fresh consecration was required for purification.

Thus the hierarchical ranking of the various castes had divine sanction even in the temple. From there, it was also practiced in the social mobility and movements of the people. The Nadars were considered to contaminate a Brahmin if they approached the latter within twenty-four paces, a Tiyan within thirty-six paces and pulayan within ninety-six paces. C.A.Innes and K.Madhava Menon have observed that artisans must keep a distance of twenty-four feet from a Brahmin while a ‘Nayadi’ must keep seventy-four feet away. In some cases this distance shrank to about four or five feet. In some other

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82. An ancient Measure of length.


cases mere sight was enough to cause pollution. Thus the pollution concepts—purity and distance caused untouchability, unapproachability and unsseeability.

The European Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the uplift of the depressed people. Though they were interested in evangelization of the religion, they attacked the superstitious beliefs and the caste atrocities of those days and created a new awareness among the outcaste groups. They raised issue of caste exclusiveness which caught the imagination of “Polluting Castes” of South Tamil Nadu. The Pallas began to embrace Christianity, which promised self-respect to all outcastes in Tamil society. Successive famines that broke out in Tamil Nadu from 1876 also drove the Pallas, as an economically vulnerable group, into the fold of Christianity, as church only had organized famine relief camps and charity homes to feed the hungry men. The Pallas invariably took to Catholicism or Lutheranism as these two denominations particularly empathized with the subaltern groups.84

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed many changes in the life pattern of the Tamils. The colonial rule of the British brought a change in the thinking pattern of the people. Political awakening brought social awareness and social and communal consciousness slowly emerged. Progressive western ideas and positive legislative measures supplemented the growth of egalitarian society. Truly, the social stratification and hierarchical status of various castes began to get transform ed with the initiative of non-Brahmin intelligentsia. The downtrodden and subaltern classes allied with the non-Brahmins began to organize themselves for taking the mantleship of new responsibilities.