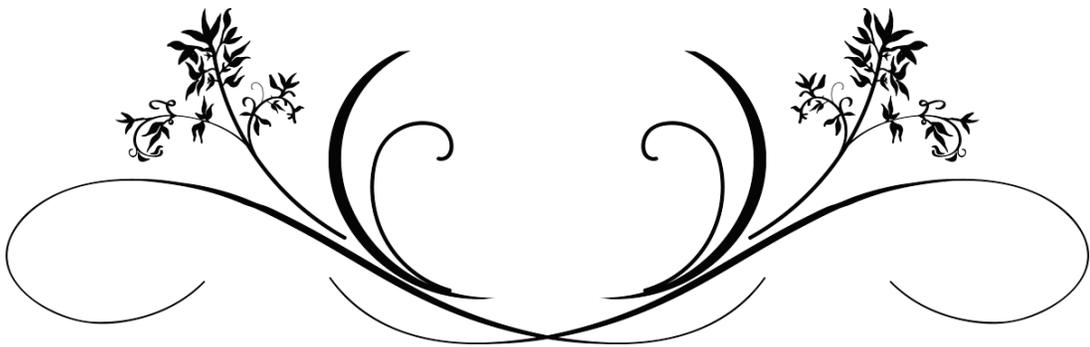


**Chapter - II**  
*Social Setting in*  
*Thoothukudi District*



## **CHAPTER - II**

### **SOCIAL SETTING IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT**

Social conditions with its traditional practices, caste divisions and conventional ways continued without any remarkable change since the Medieval Period. Linguistic traditions, pride, prejudice and geographical barriers led to decentralisation and there was a struggle for supremacy. After the downfall of the Pandyas, the fabric of political unity was completely disorganised and was replaced, by the deputies of the Rulers of Vijayanagar, the Nayaks of Madurai, the Poligars, the Nawab of Carnatic and ultimately the British. Since political unity was neither established by the Nawab of Carnatic nor by the British, social and cultural structure had less chance of drastic transformation. The chief feature of the Eighteenth Century which was perpetual warfare all over the region left no room for any profitable social activity. Attempts were made to retain the age old traditional system, but the stress and strains which were brought about by the rulers of the time was reflected in the lives of the people

The society of the Tamils was administered to retain many of the traditional cultural traits fairly intact. Its communal ramification and the intercommunal dissensions not infrequently descending to the level of violent feuds reached the end of doctrinal developments in religion and philosophy. Changes occurred in the composition of Tamil society during the Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries partly due to the influx of Marathas into the Carnatic, and partly due to the establishment of the Nawab of Carnatic and to some extent the European merchant settlements on the Coromandel Coast.

Caste provided codes of conduct and deviations from it were generally tolerated. It had a stronger hold in the rural areas of Thoothukudi. Because of its infinite complexity, it baffled those who sought to understand the social system. The caste system was maintained intact but this had never meant that each community minded only the profession theoretically assigned to it. The word 'caste' was derived from the Portuguese word and was used to designate the different tribes or classes into which the people of India were divided<sup>1</sup>.+ It has been variously described as *Jathi* or *Varna* in Sanskrit and other languages and as *Kudi* or *Kulam* in Tamil. Caste furthermore, is not a timeless intellectual abstraction which may be exhaustively described by reference to the Code of Manu or other ancient writings. It is a social form with a history of its own which has changed and is changing and has certainly diverged substantially from its misty and obscure origin. Caste assigned to each individual his own profession or calling and the handling of this system from father to son, from generation to generation, made it impossible for any person or his descendants to change to any other. Such an institution was probably the only means that the most clear-sighted prudence could devise for maintaining a state of civilisation amongst a people endowed with the peculiar characteristics of the Hindus. The caste system was the product of slow evolution by the intermingling of people who were in different stages of developments and levels of civilisation and who probably belonged to dissimilar ethnic stocks and consequently were of different skin colours and physiognomy. The ancient law makers were well aware of the danger caused by religious and political innovations and anxious to establish durable and inviolable rules for the different castes comprising the Hindu Nation, saw no surer way of attaining their object than by combining in an unmistakable manner those two

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<sup>1</sup> Abbe Dubois J.A, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, Oxford, 1897, p. 15.

great foundations of orderly government, religion and politics. Everything was governed by superstition and had religion for its motive. The spirit of caste united the three tendencies, repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialisation and all the three had to be borne in mind if one wished to give a complete definition of the caste system.

There was a need to protect the institution of caste or *varnasrama dharma* especially in view of the Muslim invasions. The caste system was inextricably interwoven with religion. There was a need for tightening the bond of union among the people. Orthodoxy was enforced and free social mingling was prohibited. Inscription of 1623 records the orders of the king prohibiting the five sub divisions of the Kammalar (artisan caste) from communal fellowship.<sup>2</sup> Though the nomenclature of constituents of the four fold caste had continued to remain in use, in speech and writing, it became in reality obsolete on account of the rise of hundreds of castes and subcastes with watertight compartments in the wake of Muslim rule.

Castes and subcastes were running to multitude. Though the caste system was more elastic than imagined, it is in its essence, rather protective than progressive and places strict limits upon the aspirations of ability. Ariyanatha was dissuaded from making himself king by a priest asking if he had ever heard of a Vellalan being raised to that dignity. So also for Yusuf Khan to rise to the position to which he attained, it was essential for him to be freed from what every obstacle that might be imposed upon him by his religion.<sup>3</sup> Intercaste marriages were comparatively rare, while interdining and social intercourse outside one's own caste became restricted. The outlook of the people were conservative and their blind faith in tradition, absence of

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<sup>2</sup> Satyanatha Aiyar, R., *History of the Nayaks of Madura*, Oxford, 1924, p.257.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, S.C., *Yusuf Khan, The Rebel Commandant*, London, 1914, p.5.

organised education and consulting the rules as envisaged in the books of the ancient times were obstacles for change.

### **FAMILY SYSTEM**

The peculiar feature of society in the Thoothukudi district was the practice of joint family system.<sup>4</sup> Family was the smallest unit of the social fabric and it functioned as an established institution. The family was well integrated, homogeneous and stable. Since the entire family shared the pleasures and pains, mental unstabilty of the members was reduced. The father exercised vital authority over the family members, and women occupied a subordinate position. They were hospitable, went to the temples, participated in domestic functions and treated the husband with respect. The practice of the Muslims keeping their women in concealment as per the religion stressed female' modesty.'

The income of all the persons of the family was added to the general fund of the family and the expenditure was met. The command of the elders was unquestionable in the family. A clear system of inheritance and succession was widely prevalent among the Hindus. The eldest son retained the personal effects of his father and with the consent of his brothers retained his house, but the value was deducted from the share in the property. Among the Kallars and Maravars, lineages were traced through the male members and the properties of the deceased naturally went to the sons.

The western ideas of family and family life had very little impact on the traditional concept of the Hindus. Western education, ideals, customs and manners did not create an enduring impression on the people and as a result they remained true to their heritage and culture.

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<sup>4</sup> Ramaswamy, A., *op.cit.*, p.169.

## HOME

The villages in Thoothukudi district consisted of blocks of houses. The houses of the Brahmins stood in one block arranged in double rows facing one another. The dalit houses formed a compact block. The castes which were large in number had their own distinct quarters. The Vellalas and Maravas inhabited the same region. The half-polluting castes like the Illuvans and Nadars lived outside the main villages whereas the Paraiyas lived in the still remoter places<sup>5</sup>

## FOOD

The staple food of the rich was rice. The rural Brahmins and Vellala preferred a cold supper at night and earned a reputation for frugal habits. They were forbidden to take meat or liquor. On the contrary the agricultural labourers and artisans took *Kanji* or cold rice water in the mornings.

## DRESS PATTERN

The people in the villages wore simple garments. The common man wore a piece of cloth wrapped around his middle and another around his head.<sup>6</sup> The Marava male wore a lower cloth and upper cloth, turban and handkerchief but a Kallar tied a coarse cloth around his body and a cloth around the woolly curly hair. The Tottiens tied a piece of cloth around their body and a coloured handkerchief around his head.

The dress of a woman consisted of a *chelai* (saree) of eight yards and they decorated themselves with a variety of ornaments, made of precious metals, stones and glass which they used at all times.

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<sup>5</sup> Pate, H.R., *Tinnevely District Gazetteer*, Madras, 1917, p.100.

<sup>6</sup> John Neuhoff, H., *Voyages and Travels into Brazil and East Indies*, Vol. 2, London, 1903, p.295.

## MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Marriage, customs, rituals and ceremonies differed from caste to caste and community to community in the Thoothukudi district and they also observed certain marriage taboos. The ceremony presented an integrated compound of vedic rituals, tribal customs, rites and formalities. Though *Kalavu vali* or love marriage was theoretically and aesthetically present, they were not given the liberty to select their partners even among their own caste. Inter caste marriage was never accepted and if any person resorted to it, he was expelled from the community.

The people married at an early age. The parents of the girl invited their son-in-law and daughter to the house and entertained them for several days during the first year of marriage and during festivals. In the subsequent years, they sent rice, coconut, jaggery, and plantains as gifts. Among the Kallars, it was a practice for women to have many husbands. Child marriage was common and a girl of 5 to 9 years was given to a man of 16 or 60.<sup>7</sup> The parents had the desire to have many children which was due to the high rate of infant mortality and dependence of parents during their old age on children. The son was a religious necessity as he had to fulfil certain offerings to the dead.

The wedding ceremonies varied from caste to caste. The typical Brahmin marriage was celebrated for five days and it was marked by distinct stages namely *Kasi Yatra* (pilgrimage by the bridegroom to Kasi) *Kankana*, (exchange of threads by bride and bridegroom) *Kaniyadana* (gift of virgin) and *Mangala Sutra Dasana* (fastening the sacred thread round the bride's neck).<sup>8</sup> The marriage for the girl was arranged after she attained the age of puberty.

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<sup>7</sup> Abbe Dubois, J.A., *op. cit.*, Part I, pp.175-176.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Part 2, pp. 217-218.

Polygamy was unknown among the Vellalas and the chastity of their women was zealously guarded.<sup>9</sup> The bride brought a furnished house as a dowry and at times landed property. The Pillamars and Tuluvas employed Gurukkal of their own caste during marriage.

The Tottiyars celebrated the marriage for seven days. The bride was presented with a few measures of grain which was taken in procession and handed over to the bridegroom's party and the priest tied the chain around the neck of the woman and the marriage was conducted at the bride's residence. When the marriage was completed, the bridegroom's sister presented money and cloth to the parents of the bride and tied a horse hair at the neck of the girl and the girl was taken to the bridegroom's house where both exchanged *Valathadi* (curved stick) as mark of their alliance. Divorce was permitted.

The Nadar girls were married either before or after puberty, the *thali* tying ceremony took place just before sunrise. With regard to the remarriage of widows, the custom differed from place to place. Question of divorce occasionally came for decision before a *Nattamai* or local headman. Divorce was not forbidden. Extravagance and luxurious expenses were avoided. Vellalarnadu Kallars used *thali* and served vegetarian food on the marriage day, while the Melainadu Kallars used *Karunkani* (Ornament) and served non-vegetarian food. After fixing the date of marriage, if the bridegroom had to go to the battlefield and, he was unable to return, his sister performed his duties at the marriage. It was considered disgraceful to stay even one night away from the protection of the family of her husband.<sup>10</sup> *Maruvidu* was a part of the marriage ceremony when the newly married couple on the third day would go to the bride's house and return with *sridhanam* (dowry) to the bridegroom's

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<sup>9</sup> Hill, S.C., *op. cit.* p.4.

<sup>10</sup> Ramaswamy, A, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

house. The Kallars obtained divorce after giving a part of his property to his wife while a Kallar woman secured divorce after paying a sum of money to her husband.<sup>11</sup>

Another peculiar feature among the Kallars was that, the sister of the bridegroom went to the bride's house and presented twenty one coins and a cloth to the bride's parents and tied a horse hair thread in which a triangular ornament (*tali*) was tied to the bride. They gave a feast at the bridegroom's house and both exchanged 'Valarithadi' or boomerang (curved stick). A feast was arranged in the bride's house and the bride was presented a small quantity of rice and tea when she left to her husband's house.

Intercaste marriages occasionally took place between Maravar members of the different sections. The Karkurichi people never arranged marriages outside their own sect. The Kattali section again divided itself into two main classes, mainly those who were *Periyaalai* and those who were *Siriyatali*.<sup>12</sup> Marriage ceremonies were celebrated for two to three days at the bridegroom's house. The formal agreement was made early, orally between the parties and the bridegroom's people went to the bride's house and gave the *parisam*, usually a present of jewels and a silk cloth to the bride. Adult marriage was the rule and widows were eligible for re-marriage. The brother of the deceased husband was expected to take his place, marry the widow after getting divorce.<sup>13</sup>

Among the Kondaiyan Kottai people, the bridegroom sent a *tali* to the bride's house and in unavoidable circumstances, a stick was used to represent him to which the *tali* was tied. The woman wore two *talis* one before marriage known as

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<sup>11</sup>Ward, B.S., *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of Madurai, and Dindugal*, Vol. 3, Madras, 1895, pp. 2-11.

<sup>12</sup>Pate, H.R., *op.cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>13</sup>Rajaram Rao, T., *Ramnad District Manual*, Madras, 1933, p. 131.

*Tumbmaani*, and other during marriage known as *Mayirkodi*. Divorce and re-marriage were prevalent. Among the poor Agamudaiyar, the bridegroom's sister presented betel leaves, arecanuts and flower to the bride and tied turmeric dyed string round the bride's neck while the conch shell was blown, and on the same day a feast was arranged at the groom's residence.

All the wealthy people erected pandals, lined the roof with calico and decorated the hall with red cloth, white gauze, tinsel, coloured paper, paint and silk cloth embroidered with flower and gold. The auspicious day was fixed with the consultation of the astrologer. Nagaswaram, Veena and Kinnara were played and large drums were beaten at the time of marriage. Dinners and processions formed regular features. Fire, oil, betel leaf, nuts, sandal, coconut, turmeric, plantains, and flowers occupied honoured positions at different ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> The formalities and rites though they seemed absurd to the outsiders, reflected the continuity of the communal traditions.

#### CONDITION OF WOMEN

The custom of elderly men marrying small girls left many women widows in their early youth. The *thali* (**mangala sutra**) was taken away from her neck, her hair was cut off and she was not permitted to re-marry by most of her caste people. The people avoided the presence of widows in domestic functions and considered seeing her face a bad omen. Certain sections of the people induced the widows to commit sati. (Suicide on the funeral pyre of husband).

Hindu widowhood changed radically the course of life of a woman. The Brahmin widows had to shave the head, wear white clothes and were prohibited from

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<sup>14</sup> Pandian, T.B., *The Ancient Heroes of South India*, Madras, 1893, pp. 20-21.

wearing ornaments. The non-Brahmins believed that the superiority of caste depended upon the strictness with which it enforced the above isolating observances of puritan widowhood.

The widows of Kottai Vellalars of Srivaikuntam in Thoothukudi district were shut mercilessly within a huge mud fort and men outside the fort were not permitted to enter into the fort. The women were given little rice, herbs or roots and they were not given fresh clothes nor was water supplied for bath. The Kottai Vellala widow was expected to devote herself to severe austerity, which would enable her to meet the partner in heaven without delay. Since all the basic comforts were denied, the widow never lived for more than six months.

The royal and princely houses practised Sati, which meant the suicide of a widow in the funeral pyre of her husband.<sup>15</sup> Father Martin, a Jesuit missionary in his letter to Father Villette gave a melancholy picture of the fate that was experienced by the Queens of Ramnad in 1710, with the death of Kizhavan Setupathi, the Rajah of Maravas. The suicide of a widow in the funeral pyre of her husband was prevalent among the royal families of the Poligars of Tirunelveli. The institution of harems, observance of purda and the seclusion of women were also due to the Muslim influence in social set up.

Women artists who were experts in the art of Bharatha Natyam, and instrumental music were employed in temples, which maintained thousands of females called Devadasis. Endowments were given by the rulers. Soon they developed into a hereditary caste and possessed peculiar social, religious customs and rites. The Devadasi system became a ground for the non-Indian evangelists of other creeds against Hinduism and securing converts.

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<sup>15</sup> Political Consultations, 20 May 1802, Vol. 6, pp. 555-556

## **SLAVERY**

Slavery had existed even before the rule of Muhammadans. Slaves were sold at the pleasure of their own masters. They were offered the lowest subsistence, generally not more than two measures of paddy on working days. The masters provided the slave with necessary funeral expenses and gave them presents on occasions like marriages, births, and festivals.<sup>16</sup>

## **SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES**

The people believed in superstitions whether they were learned or ignorant. They believed in various omens, i.e., when the bell rings, an ass brays, the dog twitches its ears or a horse neighs.<sup>17</sup> These signs were a step to achieve success. There would be danger or ill luck if one saw a widow when starting a journey, or an owl screeched, and if the bees built a nest in the house. The appearance of the tail of a star was considered evil. It was considered bad to keep the cow which calved on the Sunday and a buffalo which calved on a Friday. It was considered an offence to eat curd, ghee and honey mixed together.<sup>18</sup> These superstitious practices remained an obstacle to constructive endeavours.

## **CHARITIES**

The inhabitants considered it as a part of their religious obligation to institute charities although such institutions were not endowed by Princes, Poligars and later Zamindars, The rich weavers, artisans and merchants contributed for charitable establishments. The village communities made levies on imports, exports and professions in order to supplement the voluntary contributions. There were numerous

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<sup>16</sup> Srinivasa Raghavaiyangar, *Memorandum on the Progress of Madras Presidency During Last Forty Years of British Administration*, Madras, 1893, pp. 213.

<sup>17</sup> *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 21, p. 318.

<sup>18</sup> Revenue Sundries, Vol. 26, pp. 447-455..

charitable institutions in Tirunelveli for the welfare of the travelers, poor people, pilgrims and merchants.<sup>19</sup>

The Rulers tried to maintain the traditional Hindu social pattern. They followed a policy of religious tolerance towards the necessary activities and the people showed no disposition to protest as long as they carried on in a peaceful manner. But if they tried to resort to unfair methods of proselytisation (conversion), the people showed resentment and intolerance. Religion pervaded the lives of the people and moral laws were respected more than manmade law. They could not see their religion maligned.

## **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

Castes and sub-castes had not only proliferated and entrenched themselves but were found together in combination and shaped the nature of society. Between these two extremes, the great multitude of castes increased in their different degrees, each one preoccupied to hold its rank and to preserve its prerogatives from usurpation. The social concept worked towards the suppression of human aspirations, rights and interests and restricted the scope of the human association. All observers have been struck by the fact that specialized elements of Hindu society were not only superimposed but also mutually opposed and that the force which animated the whole system of the Hindu world was a force of repulsion which kept the various bodies distinct and drove each one to retire within itself.

## **BRAHMINS**

The Brahmins though they constituted a small percentage of the population, occupied a unique position in the society because of their religious importance as well

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<sup>19</sup> Revenue Sundries, Vol. 38, p. 10.

as intellectual pursuits.<sup>20</sup> They were the repositories of Vedic knowledge, and served as priests, purohits and astrologers. Though they considered themselves as a single caste, they fell into so many sub-divisions. Most of the Brahmins in Thoothukudi were indigenous Tamil Brahmins.<sup>21</sup> They were primarily divided into two well known religious sects, the Saivites and the Vaishnavites. Their ancestors were immigrants from the north who were induced to settle down permanently through liberal grants of fertile lands exempted from taxation. Many Poligars instituted free feeding houses for them.

There was a universal practice among the Brahmins in child marriage, and every Brahmin girl was compelled to marry by religious tradition before the attainment of puberty. This led to an evil consequence of the occurrence of a noticeable number of child widows among them and re-marriage of widows was prohibited on religious ground. Their strict adherence to vegetarianism, their puritanic traditions and study of Hindu, Sanskrit and Vedic knowledge helped them to retain their individuality and respectability.

When the British servants built a parapet wall in the premises of a temple for operating telegraph at Trichinopoly, Brahmins gathered together, beat their drums and displayed flags from the top of the buildings, and showed their opposition until the British withdrew from the venture.<sup>22</sup> The spies called *hircarrahs* were the important attendants of the belligerents. The Brahmins, who were generally influenced by their religion, ensured their security which enabled them to go to any territory unmolested.

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<sup>20</sup> Venkatasubramanian, T.K., *History of Tinnevely, 1600-1900 A.D.*, Ph.D Thesis, University of Madras, Madras, 1977, p.206

<sup>21</sup> Sundararaj Manickam, *The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1977, p.25

<sup>22</sup> Military Consultations, 3 March 1799, Vol. 250, p.1256.

They went in disguise and gathered military secrets of the enemy.<sup>23</sup> The Maratha Brahmins entered the public service in large numbers and settled in the country. A distinction was made between the two groups of Brahmins-*Vaidika* or devoted to religion and *Lokika* or given up to worldly concerns. Sometimes they gave leadership to popular agitations against the British administration. When the *Faujdar* of Tirunelveli broke an idol to pieces, the Brahmins organized a strike, people stopped their production and harvest and demonstrated for several days.<sup>24</sup>

### VELLALAS

The Vellalas were supposed to be the descendants of foreign immigrants who entered the country of Madurai around 900 A.D. They came next to the priestly class in the order of social precedence. They also served as the chief advisors of the Poligars of Tirunelveli.<sup>25</sup> The members were likely to be of versatile disposition and finally as statistics show, amongst all the castes in Tirunelveli, the Vellalars were in height and chest measurement, surpassed only by the Maravas. Ariyanatha Mudali who founded the Poligar system in Madurai Nayakdom belonged to this caste. The Vellalas bore the titles *Pillai*, *Mudali* and *Goundar*. They were divided into numerous sub-divisions. The Tondaimandalam Vellalas were divided into two endogamous sections namely Mudaliyar and Tuluvan also known as Pillai.

A Vellala who officiated in the temple of a minor deity Pillaiyar or an Amman was called othuvar or othuvanmurti (priest). They worshipped Siva ad Sakthi. They built temples for their family deities and priests called Pandarams were appointed. They performed daily worship in their houses and studied the writings of saints. They had their own religious institutions or mutts which were presided over by the

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<sup>23</sup> Military Sundries, 3 August 1784, Vol. 66, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Military Consultations, 1 March 1799, Vol. 250, pp. 1210-1215.

<sup>25</sup> Pate, H.R., *op. cit.* p. 137.

members of their own caste. They performed death ceremony in memory of the dead and invoked the spirits of the dead on new moon days.

### **MUKKALATHOR**

Mukkalathor were also known as 'Thevars'. The Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars constituted Mukkalathor which meant "people of three castes". They were also described as the people of Muvendar Kulam.<sup>26</sup>

### **KALLARS**

The Kallars were numerically the important and, ethnologically perhaps, the most interesting of all the castes. They were the feudal retainers of the Poligars who occupied forest and mountainous parts of the country. The term Kallar means a robber.<sup>27</sup> Since the later part of the Nineteenth Century, the term had been notorious in many parts of the country, by the application of the Criminal Tribes Act to the Kallars of Kallar Nadu.<sup>28</sup> Apparently they were aboriginals in race and though passionately attached to the gods whose little brass images filled their temples, they had no great love for the Brahmins and they were looked upon as a potentially powerful force in view of their fighting qualities and gifted leadership. The Maravas and Kallars in particular had an aptitude, peculiar to themselves to maintain an opinion which they formed, whether it was right or wrong.<sup>29</sup> The Kallars were divided on the basis of geographic and economic considerations. They remained with their primitive agriculture, subsistence living and were backward in socio-economic betterment. They plunged themselves into the first leg of the battles and wars by spying on the enemies and undertook cattle raids. They provided resources for

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<sup>26</sup> Mullaly, S., *Notes on Criminal Classes of Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1982, p. 85.

<sup>27</sup> Hill, S.C., *op. cit.*, p.25.

<sup>28</sup> Ramaswamy, A., *op. cit.*, p.137.

<sup>29</sup> Revenue Consultation, 14 December 1798, Vol. 91, p. 4397.

guerilla activity. They collectively united as a caste against other communities when there was an absolute need.

Kallars indulged in petty theft as a means of their livelihood: When they were tried for cattle lifting or dacoity, they refused to adhere to the system of law and administration because they felt that criminal activities against the police system were a token of their hatred towards the British and the political status of a dominant caste. The Kallars were organized into many divisions.<sup>30</sup> The Kallar chieftains were organized into indigenous confederacies on socio-political basis. Each one of these were divided into several nadus and secondary villages. The council elected a five member executive *Thevathana Sabai* among whom one was the head of the confederacy (Periya Thevar) and another was a deputy head of the confederacy (Chinna Thevar). They decided executive and judicial matters like the policy decision regarding the security and general administration of the confederacy, social, cultural, and religious problems and individual grievances. The socio political organization of the Piramalai Kallars was hierarchically constituted from Periya Thevar down to the lowest lineage segments in the villages.

The Kallars chief deity is Alagarswamy, the god of the great Alagar Koil. Karuppan was essentially the god of the Kallars who delighted in the sacrifice of goats and sheep and was said to be fond of bedecking himself with iron chains.

A remarkable custom of the Kallars was the practice of circumcision which was adopted by few of them. When a member of the Kallar died, a piece of new cloth was given to the other male members of the same *kilai* by the heir of the deceased. If the brother failed to hand over the cloth to his sister, her husband regarded himself degraded and divorced her. When the girl attained puberty, the Kallars kept the girl

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<sup>30</sup> Ward, B.S., *op.cit.*, pp. 5-7.

separately for seven to nine days and when a child was born in a family the entire family kept the child and mother separately for thirty days. As regards the disposal of the dead, both burial and cremation were the systems among the Kallars. Cremation was practiced in the case of death due to infection or in the case of abnormal death. The ceremony was very pious and simple.

## MARAVAS

The Maravas formed the dominant group in the central and northern part of Tirunelveli. As they were trained for war, they marched against the village of other castes and attacked them. Many of the Western Poligars of Tirunelveli belonged to this community. The most important characteristic feature of this caste was their sobriety *Maravu* (secret) and *Maram denoted* ferocity.<sup>31</sup> The general titles of the Maravas were Thevar, Talaivar, Servaikarar, Karaiyalar and Rayar Vamsam.<sup>32</sup> The origin of this tribe was a much disputed one. According to A.J. Stuart they were one of the first Dravidan tribes that penetrated to the south of the peninsula. The Sethupathi line or Marava dynasty of Ramnad, R.J.E. Trucy writes claimed great antiquity.

The Maravas were divided into sub-castes like the Kambunadu Maravas, Kondyakotta Marava, Kothikar and Pannayar.<sup>33</sup> Though they were Saivites and they worshipped with zeal and fervour, peculiar deities of Karuppanaswamy and Bhadrakalli.<sup>34</sup> The most important was Sudalai Madan, Lord of Cremation Grounds.<sup>35</sup> Though they were avowedly Saivites, their gurukkal were Vellalas. They used Saivite sectarian marks on their forehead.

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<sup>31</sup> Pate H.R., *op. cit.* p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> Ramaswamy, A., *op. cit.*, p.140.

<sup>33</sup> Pandian T. B., *op. cit.*, pp.13-14.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

<sup>35</sup> Pate, H.R., *op. cit.*, p. 134.

The women lengthened the apertures in their earlobes to the extent of several inches by hanging in them wonderfully large and heavy metal ornaments.<sup>36</sup> The dead were either burnt or cremated. The son of the deceased attended the funeral function and on the next day the bones and ashes were immersed in the river or other waterside.

### **AGAMUDAIYAS**

The Agamudaiyas were the least in number.<sup>37</sup> They were closely connected with the Maravas by descent and resembled them in their appearance, habits and customs. The word Agamudaiyar was derived from the root '*Aham*' which meant land or house. According to Nelson, it means a temple and padi. A. J. Stuart concludes that the name Agamudaiyar was derived from *Aham* or *Agam* which meant pride.

The Agamudaiyars also styled themselves as Vellalas and Pillais. They were Saivites and they engaged Brahmin priests for their birth, marriage and death ceremonies, unlike the Vellalas. They worshipped Aiyandar, Pidari and Karupannaswamy with great zeal.

### **TOTIENS**

According to A.J. Stuart, writing in the Madras Census Report of 1891, the Totiens were a caste of Telugu cultivators settled in the districts of Madura, Tinnevely, Coimbatore and Salem. They were the descendants of the Poligars and soldiers of the Nayak King of Vijayanagar who conquered the Madurai country at the beginning of the Sixteenth Century. The traditional story of their migration to the

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<sup>36</sup> Rajaram Rao, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>37</sup> Bose, K., *Forward Bloc*, Madras, 1988, pp. 50-70.

Madurai and Triunelveli districts is given in several of the Mackenzie Manuscripts. They were also called Kambalatars.

When a Tottiyar died, the bones were buried along with a coin and a stone was planted on the spot and these stones were arranged in an irregular circle. The Chakkiliar carried the fire to the burning ground and the pyre was lit not by the sons but by the relatives (Sambandis).

### **NADARS**

According to the Census of 1891, Nadars (Shanars) were the toddy drawing caste of the south of peninsula. They were much concentrated in Thoothukudi district. The word 'Shanar' is ordinarily derived from the Tamil word 'saru' meaning Toddy.<sup>38</sup> In the social ladder they were regarded as a caste outside the four traditional varnas. There were frequent clashes between the Maravas and Shanars and each of them asserted their superiority over the other. When the British attempted to spread their influence, the Maravas offered stiff resistance and were hence denied of their kaval duties and the Christian Shanars were appointed in their place, which increased the animosity between the two castes. The Christian Missionaries easily secured mass converts from this community.<sup>39</sup>

### **SCHEDULED CASTE**

The Paraiyars and Pallars were the low castes. They were field workers. They were denied any right in the society and the things touched by them were considered polluted and they lived in the suburbs. A Paraiyar was forbidden to cross a Brahmin locality and if he entered the house either accidentally or intentionally, he was murdered or punished severely. It was considered a contamination, if the person of the

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<sup>38</sup> Ramaswamy, A., *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> Pate, H.R., *op. cit.*, p.90.

low caste prepared the food and the contaminated person lost his caste and the remedy consisted of large purification ceremonies.<sup>40</sup>

## RELIGION

Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were the three major religions. The Hindus constituted the major population in every taluk of the Thoothukudi district. Temples were erected in isolated spots, woods, highways, in the middle of tanks, on the borders of rivers and other large reservoirs, besides on the summits of steep rocks, mountains and hills.

## HINDUS

The Hindus, worshipped a large number of divinities of various descriptions. They were noted for their grandeur and distinguished by huge pyramid statues of stones, of baked earth and granite which represented the objects of popular worship.

Every caste or Hindu family had its own private temple. The petty deities worshipped in Thoothukudi district had an acknowledged place in the Hindu mythology and it seemed probable that they did not originally belong to the Hindu system, but were the objects of worship of the aboriginal tribes and adopted by the Brahminical immigrants from the north.<sup>41</sup> The people offered sacrifices in these temples for protection against evils. The inhabitants also erected monuments in honour of self devoted victims, including women who died as virgins.<sup>42</sup>

The temples had independent sources of income, irrespective of whether they were large or small. The principal pagodas held possessions of extensive lands free from taxation. They also received endowments in money, jewels, cattle and provision.

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<sup>40</sup> Abbe Dubois, J.A., *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 50-51.

<sup>41</sup> Pharoah and Co., *A Gazetteer of South India*, London, 1885, p. 441.

<sup>42</sup> Turnbull, T., *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of Tirunelveli*, Madras, 1821, pp. 8-9.

The priests, dancing girls and servants who established themselves in the temples shared the income in proportion to their ranks. The Devadasis received a fixed salary for the religious duties which they performed but since it was meagre, they supplemented it by selling their favours in as profitable a manner as possible. The instruments on which the musicians played were clarinets, trumpets, cymbals, and several kinds of drums. The temples celebrated the festivals with great pomp and show. The idols were taken in procession on huge chariots amongst chanting of mantras, beating of drums, trumpets and shouts of the crowds. The dancing women, the chorus and the orchestra took turns during the religious ceremonies, which often terminated with a procession around the temple. The people suspended their routine work, decorated their houses, wore the best dress, feasted with friends and relatives and played games. The Hindus also undertook pilgrimages to holy shrines like Rameswaram, Banaras and Jagannath and spent their money as offerings to god.

The people looked upon Brahma as the first god. The orthodox gods of the Hindus were Siva, Vishnu and a hierarchy of lesser gods, who formed the Hindu pantheon. Besides, the people also worshipped unorthodox gods, minor deities and evil spirits. Karuppan. Ayyanar, Draupathi and Muneeswaran were some of the popular village deities.<sup>43</sup> Lord Vigneswara was worshipped at all ceremonies. Every village had its own guardian deity known as Uramma, whose benevolence was sought for the welfare of the village community. However, inferior deities like Pidari, Marudappan, Saitan and Bhadrakalli received significant attention. Animals like bull, monkey, kite, and plants like Darba, Arasu or fig tree and Tulasi were also worshipped.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ramaswami, A., *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>44</sup> *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. 12, p. 430, Vol. 21, p. 224.

## ISLAM

The Muslims formed a major community of the Thoothukudi district. The growth of the Muslim population in the state was the direct consequence of the frequent Muslim incursions. The assumption of power by the Nawabs of the Carnatic and their struggle with the Poligars led to Muslim settlements. The original emigrants must have grown numerically by intermingling freely with the native population. The Islamic inroad was the outcome of political needs and economic opportunities.

The Muhammadans belonged to the widespread class which spoke Tamil and was generally designated by the comprehensive term Lebbai, which was reserved for priests or men of learning.<sup>45</sup> The merchants were known as Ravuttar. Though Tamil was the common language, there was an inner circle, some of whom were learned in Arabic. The Muhammadans wore a peculiar Fez made of coloured grass. On the occasion of birth and marriages, they followed certain Hindu customs. The celebration was connected with taboos, and wooden frames in which offerings of sandal dedicated to saints were carried in procession were imitations of Hindu rituals.<sup>46</sup> Numerous mosques and educational institutions for Muhammadans were also established.<sup>47</sup> The Muslims went on pilgrimage to the tomb of the saintly sahibs at various places and took procession in the month of April.<sup>48</sup> The chief characteristic of the Muslim population was the perfect communal amity they had built with the Christians and Hindus. Communal conflicts were very few in this district. The Muslims showed a special amity to the Hindu caste of Tottier, Pallar, Kammalar and rendered mutual assistance in times of trouble<sup>49</sup> which could be attributed to the

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<sup>45</sup> Pate, H.R., *op. cit.*, p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> Hemingway, F.R., *Trichinopoly District Gazetteer*, Vol.I, Madras 1901, p. 78.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> Military Country Correspondence, 21 April 1794, Vol. 45, p.125.

<sup>49</sup> Hemingway, F.R., *op.cit.*, p.78.

tradition that Ibrahim Nabi, a Muslim saint was brought up in the house of the Kammalar. Some Poligars of Tirunelveli granted lands to Muslim priests.<sup>50</sup> Said Ali raised a pillar in front of a Vishnu temple as a mark of gratitude for receiving relief from the disease.<sup>51</sup>

## CHRISTIANITY

In 1592, the Jesuits founded the Madura Mission and made vigorous attempts to propagate Catholicism. This had great impact on the Brahmins, Nadars, Paravas and Depressed Classes. In 1606, the mission of Madura was established by Father Robert De Nobili and the Christians carried on their work at Trichinopoly, Tanjore, Madura and subsequently at Tirunelveli - Thoothukudi. The Nadars embraced Christianity during the period of Father John De Britto in 1683. In 1742, the Paravas obtained the services of the famous divine scholar and poet Father Beschi of the Madura Mission. However they could not achieve much due to the troubles inside the Church and growing influence of Protestantism.<sup>52</sup> The Danish Lutherans in 1706 and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in 1767 founded the Protestant Mission.<sup>53</sup> The history of Protestant Missionaries effort in Tirunelveli -Thoothukudi goes back to the era of the Poligar wars. Schwartz mentioned in his diary that as early as 1771, one of his Trichinopoly converts was engaged in preaching the people of Tirunelveli - Thoothukudi. The first English Church was built by Glorinda at Palayamkottai in 1785.

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<sup>50</sup> Rangachari, V., *Inscription of Madras Presidency*, Vol. 2, Madras, 1919, p.281.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Besse, L., *Father Beschi, His Times and His Writings*, Trichinopoly, no year, pp. 121-121.

Venkataswamy Row, T., *Tanjore District Manual*, 1893, p. 275.

<sup>53</sup> Hemingway, F.R., *op.cit.*, pp.76-77.

The Depressed Classes, the most neglected folk among the Hindus, accepted Christianity in large numbers. The higher caste looked upon conversion as tantamount to their degradation to the lowest social status.<sup>54</sup> These people disliked missionary activities, and their honoured customs, culture, and traditions were barriers and obstacles to the spread of Christianity. There was common hatred and religious conflicts in the land.<sup>55</sup> Some of the converts retained Hindu rituals and caste system even after conversion. The spread of Christianity was thus gradual and it extended over a number of years of devoted and hard work. The divisions of the society on the basis of professions caused communal hatred and restrictions kept the society divided and there was a tendency to consider large sections of the people as socially inferior. Viewed from an aesthetic stand point, which usually determined the standards of culture and colonisation of societies, they connected a youthful vigour and longevity of social structure. Internal dissensions invited external intervention in the country. The British deliberately kept their hands off from disturbing the social institutions because they were anxious to maintain political security. In the absence of freedom to take a profession which was considered noble, the people were less motivated to be innovative which retarded economic development among the downtrodden and developed an inferiority complex and the resultant hatred made the society the most iniquitous and backward among the world communities.

## **IMMIGRANTS AND EXISTENTIAL COMMITMENTS**

There had been 'fractional segmentations' during the Eighteenth Century. Factions as groups which are conflicting parts of a whole and disruptive of that whole but not necessary to the structure in the sense that new lineage conflict is, and which

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<sup>54</sup> Lockman, J., *Travels of Jesuits*, Vol. I, London, 1762, p. 298.

<sup>55</sup> Military Consultations, March 1799, Vol. 230, p. 1256.

are not permanent, came into existence when circumstances are favourable to their appearances.<sup>56</sup>

Formerly known as Shanars, the Nadars were numerically more in Tiruchendur, Nanguneri, Sathankulam and Srivaikuntam taluks. Early statistical reports regard them as a caste outside the four varnas.<sup>57</sup> They were denied entry into the *agraharams* of Brahmin settlements and residential colonies of higher caste Hindus.<sup>58</sup> Christian evangelists of Roman Catholic as well as Protestant were able to secure mass converts from this community. Still, quite a number of them continued to be followers of Hinduism.<sup>59</sup> A conspicuous feature of Thoothukudi history during the period was the Marava- Shanar clashes. The Maravas, might have migrated to Thoothukudi which was not their original home, from Ramnad at different periods.<sup>60</sup> There are other contradictory views which are conjectural.<sup>61</sup> Various etymological and, mythological interpretations have been postulated and they center around the term 'Marava'. During C. 1700...1801, the Maravas inhabited many villages of the Thoothukudi district. The Maravas were not prevented from entering residential areas of higher caste Hindus including Brahmin *agraharas*. The Shanars remonstrated. The British had to face the hostility of the Marava Poligars headed by Puli Tevar.<sup>62</sup> The British had also deprived the Maravas of their *Kaval* duties. They appointed Shanar converts to Christianity in their place. The cleavage between Shanars and Maravas widened. Invariably, the Shanars received the worst of the fights.

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<sup>56</sup> Pocock, D.F., 'Bases of Faction in Gujarat' in *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol.8 (4), 1957, pp. 295 and 306.

<sup>57</sup> Stuart, H.A., *Census of India, 1891, Madras*, Vol.XIII, Government Press, Madras, 1893 - classifies the community and ranks them below Sudras (non-Brahmins) and above Pallars (Scheduled).

<sup>58</sup> Pate, H.R., *op. cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>59</sup> The Christian Nadars called their Hindu brethren as 'Achranyam' (non-believers) while the Hindus called their counterparts 'Veeram or Vedam' (followers of the 'Christian Veda).

<sup>60</sup> Kadhivel, S., *op.cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Kanakasabhai, V., *op.cit.*, p. 62,

<sup>62</sup> Puli Tevar of Nerkattumsevvai and most of the Western Poligars were Maravas.

'Vadugar' of all the immigrants were prominent. 'Vaduuga' is a common word used in the Tamil language to denote all those who immigrated from the northern direction into the Tamil boundary. Within the jurisdiction of the Thoothukudi district, it was applied to all the Telugu settlers who came with the Nayaks. Evidently they were drawn from various quarters that formed parts of the Vijayanagar territory. They were battalions of soldiers who served in the army brought by Viswanatha Nayak to Madura to suppress the rebellion of the King of Madurai as well other chieftains.<sup>63</sup> The Vadugars (Badagas) possessed martial qualities. They made expeditions against the Moors and even the Portuguese found it more difficult to deal with them. These were the 'Badagas' whose ravages were so frequently described and so pathetically deplored in Xavier's letters. Xavier represented them as lawless marauders. They were described as tax-gatherers. Doubtless, both representations were correct for this extraordinary combination of the characters of tax-gatherer and marauder continued to be common in the south till the cession of the Carnatic to the East India Company. In one village near Cape Comorin, Xavier himself was a witness to the horrors of Badagas.<sup>64</sup>

Nelson calls the immigrants 'Vadugas' and classifies them into Kavaras, Gollas, Reddis, Kammavars and Tottiyans (Kambalatars). Reddis, Kammavars and Tottiyans were agriculturists.<sup>65</sup> The Poligar territories of Ettayapuram, Reddipalayam, Munireddipalayam and few others belonged to the agricultural classes of the community. The Telugu Vadugas concentrated almost exclusively in the black-soil tract and the regions of the Telugu Poligars were in the black cotton soil of the

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<sup>63</sup> Sathianatha Aiyar, R., *op.cit.*, pp. 52-54.

<sup>64</sup> Caldwell, R., *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> Nelson, J.H., *Madura Country, A Manual*, Part II, Madras, 1868, p. 80.

Thoothukudi district.<sup>66</sup> Burton Stein viewed that the Vadugas selected black cotton soil because they brought with them secrets previously unknown to the Tamils for making it productive.<sup>67</sup> The main body of Kammavar soldiers settled down as cultivators under their leaders in and around Thoothukudi and Koilpatti taluks. When the Poligars were excommunicated, many of the Kammavar and Reddipalayams became extinct bearing but the names of their settlements as vestiges of their colonisation. A considerable number of Kammavar Naidus and Reddiars who continue to live in the Thoothukudi district engage themselves in various trades, industries and learned professions. Their customs and social solidarity are akin to those of their counterparts in Andhra Pradesh.

The Kambalattar (Kambalaththu Nayakar) are practically extinct. Remnants of their traditional agnates or cognates in the Telugu country are not to be traced. The Poligars of Ettayapuram and Panchalamkurichi belong to this community. Their ancestry is traced to a community of hunters.<sup>68</sup> Being dwellers of quasi-agricultural surroundings, they were experts in reclaiming waste-lands.<sup>69</sup> The resilience of the Kambalattar caste is due to the way in which it had adjusted itself in a changing economy. This is evident by an analysis of the means by which the caste had met economic challenges during two regimes, particularly prior to 1801.<sup>70</sup>

The Company servants classify Pallar, Pulayar and Parayar under the category of 'Native Labour'. The Pallars were industrious and hard-working land-labourers found mostly in the Madras Presidency, especially in the Southern Tamil Country.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> David Ludden, *Early Capitalism and Local History in South India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, p.51

<sup>67</sup> Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Delhi, 1980, p.2

<sup>68</sup> Mackenzie Collections. Vol. III. D. No. 2829. The Vadakarai Poligar (Ramabhadra Nayak) gives details of his ancestry in the Document.

<sup>69</sup> *Indian Antiquary*, 1915, pp. 135-137.

<sup>70</sup> Radakrishna Mukerjee, *The Dynamics of a Rural Society*, Berlin, 1957, p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> Gustav Oppert, *op.cit.*, p.75.

J.H. Hutton observed: “‘Pallar’-an exterior Tamil caste of agricultural labourers-Devendra kula Vellalar - a fancy name for the Pallars who thereby claimed were created by Devendra, the King of the Gods to labour for the Vellalar”.<sup>72</sup> Two inscriptions assigned to the Seventeenth Century, one from Karivalamvanthanallur (Sankaranainarkoil taluk, Tirunelveli district) and another from Srivilliputhur (formerly in Tirunelveli district and later in Ramanathapuram district) refer to the Pallars as 'Devendrakutumpans' and the 'sons of the celestial woman'.<sup>73</sup> These are fancy names and are not found in earlier records, literary or epigraphical.<sup>74</sup>

The Census Report of 1891 lists the following categories of Pallars engaged in agricultural operations. They are Ayya : 12991; Amma: 105607 Anja: 100696; Aththa: 32391; Kadayan: 18830; Mangala-Nattan: 15544; Cholian: 41015; Tondaiman: 49231; Devendran:75780; Pallan: 213222 and Mooppan: 129635.<sup>75</sup> Of these, Amma, Anja, and Aththa were found in the Tirunelveli district. The recorded distribution was Amma: 53933; Aththa 29193 and Anja: 57086. Those who belonged to the Aththa group claimed superiority over others. It is said that agriculture was the traditional occupation of all Pallars except one branch designated as, 'Odiya Pallar', (literally means the Palla who deserted) who took to weaving. A folk-song popular in the district says that 'Veera nattan' brought seedlings, and 'Samudranattan' looked after irrigation. As irrigation is vital to agriculture, the latter held a key position.

The development of irrigational facilities needed a permanent institutional basis. Since the Poligars of Tirunelveli did not long survive the British onslaught, they

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<sup>72</sup> Hutton, J.H., *Caste in India*, Bombay, 1951, pp. 278-288.

<sup>73</sup> A.R.E., 432 of 1914 and 588 of 1926.

<sup>74</sup> Venkatasubramanian, T.K., *Political Change and Agrarian Tradition in South India, (C.1600-1801)*, Delhi, 1986, p.52.

<sup>75</sup> Stuart, H.A., Census of India, 1891, Madras, Vol. XIII, Madras, 1893, p. 247; Thangavelu, G., *Raobahadur Rettaimalai Srinivasan: The Champion of Civil Rights of Dalits in Tamil Nadu*, New Century Book House Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, 2011, p.42.

had hardly the opportunity and leisure to evolve a permanent irrigational network. Tank-irrigation was more popular with the Poligars, particularly in the Eastern Palayams. In as much as they were 'localised powers', they had no need to plan for others. In all probability, 'Samudranattan' must have been those class of labourers cutting tanks and making provisions for local irrigational needs. Their occupation being seasonal, they should have enjoyed greater mobility and must have also served in the army of the Poligars, whom S.R. Lushington had referred to as 'Superior ryots'.<sup>76</sup>

The Tirunelveli Collectorate Records furnish the clue for the inference made. They read as follows: "The irrigation system grew in a cellular segmented manner, similar but allied, staunchly independent. In the system, irrigation facilities were constructed, maintained and regulated by the same organisational units that controlled cultivation process as a whole".<sup>77</sup>

There are references to 'Pulaiyar' in ancient Tamil literary works as '*Acharakkovai*' and Saiva canonical literature. They are described in those references as keepers of the burning ghats and caretakers of cremation. They were deemed untouchables and classified along with Pallars and Parayars and were isolated and made to live in '*Cheris*'.<sup>78</sup> *Cheris* are slums. No doubt, they are signified residences of particular groups of people practising identifiable occupations, and all such inhabitants of *cheris* were not untouchables. Only certain castes inhabiting such demarcated areas seem to have been treated as untouchables.

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<sup>76</sup> David Luddens' view that Pallars and Pariahs maintained themselves as independent land-controllers outside the wet-zone in the 19th Century seems to be a sweeping generalisation. (David Ludden, *Agrarian Organisation in Tinnevely District. 800 to 1900 A.D.*, Ph.D Dissertation, Pennsylvania, 1978).

<sup>77</sup> Tirunelveli District Collectorate Records, Vol. 4368. Report on Irrigation, 15 December, 1827, pp.20-25.

<sup>78</sup> Appadorai, *Economic Conditions in Southern India 1000 to 1500 A.D.*, Vol. I, Madras, 1936, p. 274; Edgar Thurston, *op.cit.*, Vol. VI. Madras, 1909, p. 360; Vol. VII, Madras, 1909, p. 376; Hanurmanthan, K.R., *op.cit.*, p. 98; A.R.E., 378 of 1916; S.I.I., II, 5; II, 5-25; II, 4-4; II, 5-15 .

A deeper probe that has hitherto been undertaken into the history of the *Cheris* is called for before tracing either the time of occurrence of the practice of untouchability in Tamil Nadu or assigning the practice to any particular dynasty that ruled in Tamil Nadu. In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, 'Fractional segmentations' were distinctly noticeable in Thoothukudi District.