Historical Background of the Tamil Society
CHAPTER - I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TAMIL SOCIETY

This chapter studies the position of Women of Tamilnadu from the Sangam Age to the starting of Self-Respect Movement in 1925. Women in Tamil Nadu then constituted almost half the population and played a significant role in socio-economic, religio-cultural and political life of the Country. Women in Tamil Nadu were regarded equal partners in married life. In their married life chastity\(^1\) and charity\(^2\) did play a vital role. They took care of their children and the male members went out in search of wealth\(^3\). Tamil Society then was neither complicated nor ritualistic. Life was naturalistic, humanistic, secularistic (liberal) and universalistic\(^4\).

People belonging to the original tribes who lived in ancient Tamilland were Tudiar (drummer), Panar (bards), Parayar (drummer) and Kadambar (worshipper of kadambu tree or sea pirates)\(^5\). Madurai Kanchi referred to occupational groups in physiographic setting Vedan-Veduvan-Kuravan-Villavan of the Kurinci (forest – tract), the Ayan, Idaiyar of the Mullai (hilly tract) the Uravan-Uran of the Marudam (agricultural tract) and the Parathavar-Minavar of the Neithal (littoral tract)\(^6\). Tolkappiyam mentions the four divisions of society as Andanar, Arasar, Vanikar and Vellalar. The last section of Vellalar was equated with the Sudras\(^7\). The divisions were geographical and horizontal\(^8\) and not hierarchical and vertical. This division is more occupational based rather than birth based. It was not categorized into superior or inferior class. The people in these geographical divisions did various professions

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\(^1\) Kural\(\text{\texttrademark}\), 54

\(^2\) Kural\(\text{\texttrademark}\), 16

\(^3\) Kural\(\text{\texttrademark}\), 12

\(^4\) Kural\(\text{\texttrademark}\), 10


\(^6\) Puranamuri, 35, 7-8.

\(^7\) Madurai Kanchi (TI), Verse 238-326.

\(^8\) Tholkappiyam Porul, 625, 626, 632, 635.
with united effort and they co-operated with each other. There was neither gender nor caste discrimination among these people. There was much independence and inter-dependence among the original inhabitants of the four or five physiographic regions.

In the Kurinchi tract women also joined in gathering food. In the Mullai tract (littoral region) women tended the cattle’s in the sheds, milched the cows and cattles. In the Marudham (agricultural) tract, they guarded the paddy and millets from birds and tamed animals and powdered the boiled paddy to get rice. The women in the littoral region awaited the arrival of their male members who went on into the deep seas to catch or fetch fishes. Their herds were sold (bartered) for other grains, fruits, roots, honey, etc. Some of them joined the Umanar (salt vendor) and carried salt in their carts and bartered it for their catches. Both men and women shared their work and enjoyed the life. Though this inter-regional life was tribal in character, to some historians, it presented a picture of free movement of people and cultural features.

Any scholar could find in the Sangam classics, references to the prevalence of inter-regional (tinai) or ecozonal marriages. Ecozonal love took place in the jungles, forests, on the banks of rivers, under the shade of the laurel and Thazhai trees. Elopement with the knowledge of the parents was also prevalent. The mother of a girl whose body showed extra-changes, took care of her daughter and sought the help of the nimittikar (soothsayer) and arranged the marriage. Youths who sought the hands of the girls they loved were not afraid of

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9 Kudi Arasu, Erode, June, 23, 1940, p. 5.
11 குருவியும் வனத்துறை ஆட்டங்கள், பண்டைய குருவியும் வனத்துறை பூர்வகவை ஆகாசம் 32-5 & 6.
12 பெருமாள் பலர் தம்புவனுக்கு குருவியும் வனத்துறை பூர்வகவை ஆகாசம் அவளாறு வனத்துறை பூர்வகவை ஆகாசம்.
**madaleruthal** (*eruthazhvudal*) or they won in **jallikattu** (bull-fight) and then gained their lady love. Married life was filled, with care and caution. There was no preference between male child and female child. Dowry was neither demanded nor paid. The only pain on Tamil women was when their male partners were in contact with *Parattai* (harlot)\(^{14}\). Polygamy was prevalent among the ruling class and higher ups\(^{15}\). The institution of *parattai* (prostitute) of various categories is said to have been a blot on Tamil Society. Yavana women enjoyed a high degree of respect as royal bodyguards. They pursued occupations suited to the respective echozones\(^{16}\).

The distinguished feature of ancient Tamil society was that they followed inter-dining and inter-marriage which were lacking in the Aryan system. The secular sangam society had religious faith, but religion was ones own private affair. Kings did not frame any policies of religion. The Tamil society had transmutable, plastic and barrier-less professional distinction\(^{17}\).

They followed the principles of Kanian Poonkunran, ‘acting in good actions who is one’ *(the world is one and all are my kinsmen)*\(^{18}\) and Thirumular ‘One race and one god’ - ‘*ஒருநாட் ஒருகோயில் ஒருவன்*’\(^{9}\) Kambiran கம்பியர், காம்பியர், கம்பியர், கம்பியர் and Thayumanavar தேவநாயகி திருமுனசாலை சுகச்சாலை கோட்டை போர்னி.

The comparatively simple life became complicated with the advent of the Brahmins. During the Pallava period, the Brahmins had the privileges of living in the *brahmadeya* and *devadana* villages and the peasants lived in mud houses with thatched roofs and they had to seek government licence for constructing burnt-bricks houses\(^{20}\). The Brahminic customs and

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\(^{15}\) Pillai, K.K., *Landmark in the History of Tamil Nadu*, in Madras Information, No.2, February 1968, p.31.

\(^{16}\) Revolt, Erode, June 30, 1929, p. 267.

\(^{17}\) Puranamur 192.

\(^{18}\) Thiuralin, verse 2104.

conventions, ritual practices began to control women’s liberty. Eight forms of marriage\(^{21}\), of which the first two, *Brahma* and *Daiva*, were considered good, the *saptapadi* (walking seven steps), looking into the auspicious star and the tying yellow thread (trinket), checking the strength, patience and adjustment of women to men’s valour by putting their hand in the pot containing coins or gold piece, the menace of dowry, heavy feasts, looking into the most auspicious moment for conjugal relationship, the prevalence of polygamy, prostitution, and widowhood, celebrating the birth of a son and decrying the birth of girl child. These practices were imposed on the Tamil women, who were once known for their liberty, enjoying equality having the right to become poetesses, diplomats and advisers\(^{22}\). Women were reduced to the weak submission of the lust of men and strict abstinence from inter-communal love relations. The marriage was celebrated for a week or more with all paraphernalia, making the girls family bear the burden of the expenses\(^{23}\). The position of widows was deplorable and wretched. The family of a male child was acclaimed and celebrated with all sorts of festivities, again making the woman’s (brides) family bear the total expenditure. Death of male member even if old was considered a great loss, whereas the death of the old women or the young girl was not auspicious to the family.

With the incoming of Brahmin Vedism in Tamil Nadu, the secular state of Tamil Nadu became religious and thought about the other world particularly about death, which the early Tamils considered the plan of nature and attainment of *moksha* (deliverance) and began to have over the thoughts of Tamils. Ideas like *brahmacharya* (initiation to youthhood), *grahasta* (family life), *vanaprasta* (wandering life) and *Sanyasa*\(^ {24}\) (undertaking penance of delivery from this world) began to weild their influence of the Tamils. Of all these, women’s


\(^{23}\) Kudi Arasu, Erode, March 2, 1945.

role was scanty, i.e. to say nil. Besides these, the most pernicious part of Aryan system was
the caste system which spread in a society that was not hierarchised on the basis of
occupation, but on the basis of birth only and held the Tamils graded and separately
classified, preventing inter-change, inter-marriage and inter-dining. The simple society
became complex in which women’s role was avoided along with all cosmopolitan practices.
The Brahminic system of social structure entrusted more powers to men in all aspects of life
and deprived women of equally sharing the powers.25 Caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy
were the organizing principles of brahminical social order.26 The caste-oriented North Indian
exploited and discriminated the Dravidians in the name of Code of Manu. They also treated
all non-brahmin castes as Sudra i.e. a slave who should do all the manual work.27 The word
Sudras is more disgraceful and denotes Sudra as son of a Dasi or a vesi.28 Thus the
Dravidian women became wretched and powerless in a Brahmin-dominated Aryan society.

Though the caste system made its inroads into the life of the Tamils, it was not
accepted at all until the establishment of the Pallava rule. Even the Kalabhras in the post-
sangam period are said to have opposed the Brahminic sastraic people of North India in order
to restrict them.29 The Brahminic initiation of the Pallavas to kshatriyahood, conferring on
them high sounding titles, making them confer place of pre-eminence to the sanskrit
language, founding of sanskrit strong centres in Kanchi, in return, the rulers raising the
Brahmins to socially high places in society, granting them honour, land grants and position of
pre-eminence in the courts went with the process of Aryanisation of Tamil Nadu.
Consequently, both the priestly class and the ruling class joined together and kept the people

26 Uma Chakravartti, Conceptualizing Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State,
27 Saraswathi.S., Minorities in Madras State (Group Interests in Modern Politics), Impex India, Delhi, 1974,
p. 20.
28 Kudi Arasu, Erode, April 25, 1926.
presented in a Conference held at the Purathatva Era Sanskrit Parishad, Bodhgaya, 1984.
under perpetual subordination\textsuperscript{30}. Gradually, the Brahmins transplanted all their socio-religious practices in the new soil which lost its unique characteristics of naturalism, secularism, universalism, liberalism and humanism. All these activities had their impact on the Tamil women, who were coming under the spell of Brahminism and tried to imitate them. These pernicious practices especially the attendant evils of caste system were rooted in the society until the coming of the European missionaries.

In the vicious circle of the rulers and their advisers, women became puppets in their hands. Looking at the pitiable plight of women which the caste system imposed, some rationalist thinkers like Thiruvalluvar, Thirumular, poets of Nanmanikkadigai and Avvaiyar attempted to decry the evils of caste system. Even Tholkappiar’s verse on Andanar, Arasar, Vanigar and Vellalar\textsuperscript{31} came under caustic criticisms. Thiruvalluvar mentions. All men who live are one in circumstances of birth: diversities of works give each his special worth\textsuperscript{32}. Avvaiyar, \textit{there are only two castes in the world, those who did positive and those who did negative;}\textsuperscript{33} Kurunthogai pointed out – “

\textit{ஒருங்கு மீண்டும் பார்வை அறிவை அளிப்பிய ஆன்மாரா தேவாரம் செய்யாதே}” – Education could elevate a person even when he belongs to a lower divisions by birth.

In the 11\textsuperscript{th} to 12\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., Ramanujacharya\textsuperscript{34}, an orthodox Brahmin revolutionised the Tamil society by taking some untouchable followers, namely Thirukkulathor to the Vaishnava temple at Melkota, in Mandya District in Karnataka and by offering diksha to them. At Thirukoshtiyur, he climbed up the temple tower and announced


\textsuperscript{31} Tholkappiyam Porul, 625, 626, 632, 635.

\textsuperscript{32} Thirukkural - 972. மாருணகாரர் கேடையா மாருணகா முன்னம் பார்வையை அளிப்பிய ஆன்மாரா தேவாரம் செய்யாதே

\textsuperscript{33} "ஒருங்கு மீண்டும் பார்வையை அளிப்பிய ஆன்மாரா தேவாரம் செய்யாதே". குறுங்கலார், வெச்சுசெய்யல், verse -2

\textsuperscript{34} Ramanujacharya was the founder of Vishistadvaita (‘qualified monism’) philosophy of Vaishnavism. Though he was a Brahmin, he accepted a sudra, Perianambi as his Guru or preceptor. He converted a number of untouchables and sudras to vaishnavism and named them as Thirukkukathar (the holy caste). He gave them dikshai (‘purification’) and allowed them to wear the nama (‘sacred thread’). He also kept one Uragavilidas, a sudra, always by his side. Sadasivan, K., \textit{St. Ramanuja, ‘A Radical Vaishnavite Humanist of Medieval South India’}, Unpublished paper presented in a 3 day seminar on Society, Politics and Culture in Medieval South India, Department of History, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, February 13-15, 2001.
the secret mantra of Namo Narayana which was divulged to him by a sage Goshtipurna,\textsuperscript{35} to all who gathered below the tower. As a revolutionary, he created an unprecedented record in the religious History of India when religious sectarianism ruled the root. In spite of his revolutionary attempt against caste system, the castle of caste continued to exist with added strength and get support from other quarters\textsuperscript{36}. Consequently, the caste system firmly established its root and branch and affected each and every stage of women’s life horribly.

**Socio-religious Life**

By the first half of the twentieth century, society of the Madras Presidency was divided into two major segments: the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. Brahmins formed just 3.2\% of the total population, the microscopic minority, but wielded maximum powers, enjoying privileges and prerogatives\textsuperscript{37}. The Brahmins had 13 sub sects based on gotra and kula distinctions. Each one had its distinct caste rules and regulations, dos and donots\textsuperscript{38}. Some of them were Vedic reciters; some others were ritual priests; the remaining performed witchcrafts, mantra-tantra. While the Vedic Brahmins including their women folks enjoyed the superior social status, the priestly Brahmins enjoyed the middle position and the Atharvavediks came at the lowest stratum of the Brahm Society. Generally, the highest and the higher levels enjoyed English education, employment opportunities and maintained high standard of living. The ladies of the priestly Brahmins received ritual gifts, while the Vedic Brahmin ladies assisted their men in performing ritual sacrifices, reciting the Vedic srutis, chanting the mantras to the tune of pouring sacred ghee in the sacrificial fire and invoked gods. The last segment of Brahmin women eked out a poor living as opposed to the highest and higher grades\textsuperscript{39}. The Brahmin women on no account break the ritual practices acclaiming the birth of a son, his initiation to youthhood, arranging child-marriage, giving dowry, and

\textsuperscript{35} The Economic and Political Weekly, February 3, 1996, p, 295.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Thangavelu, G., Tamil Nilavaralarum, panpatum (Tl), Chennai, 1976, p.134.
\textsuperscript{39} Drysdale, History of the Brahmana Child-Widows’ hostel 1907-1919, Madras, p.2.
tonsuring the head of widow and all other ritual practices like child-marriage, divorce and widowhood which led to large scale practice of polygamy and prostitution within four-walls.\(^{40}\) The presence of widow was anathema to ceremonial practices and the death of these wretches was mostly left unnoticed. Following at Astrology and horoscope did play a major role in all these customs and conventions. They were imposed with several restrictions inspite of Brahmin’s predominance in the society\(^{41}\).

For instance, women were considered as the gateways into the caste system\(^{42}\) and thus the free movement of women in the society was restricted to maintain caste and biological purity. Manu stated that there was no relation between women and Vedic studies. He reiterated that twice born man (Brahmin) will be punished to drink Barlei liquid for a year if he teaches Veda to a Sudra or a woman\(^{43}\). There was no exchanging of woman for another woman i.e., kunda-munda sambandam among the Tamil Brahmins.\(^{44}\) Also, women’s labour was restricted within the household and their dependency upon their counterparts was increased. To protect the legitimacy of the progeny, liberty of women was deprived of and she was forced to total subjugation. In addition to this, the ideas of chastity and pativrata dharma, ("always chatu") the master-stroke of the Aryan system\(^{45}\) was imposed on women and it worsened their condition further. According to Manu, ‘A faithful wife who wishes to attain the mansion of her husband in heaven must do nothing unkind to him either while he is living or while dead’\(^{46}\). These ideas enabled a woman to be a loyal and virtuous wife to her husband, who was a God and Lord to her. Hence, over-lordship of husband was

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\(^{46}\) Manu, 5.156.
established through Hindu mythologies. The idea of *pativrata-dharma* removed the
comradeship between husband and wife but it established master and slave relation⁴⁷.

‘To protect purity of the castes which are arranged hierarchically as well as women’s
marriage between members of different castes is restricted and endogamy is followed⁴⁸. It
was also known as Hypergamous or *Anuloma* marriage in which the bridegroom belonging
to the higher caste could marry the bride of a lower caste⁴⁹. They were not allowed to do
*Pratiloma* marriage⁵⁰. Punishments like ex-communication and death were imposed on the
doers of *pratiloma* marriage⁵¹. Any Brahmin woman contacting low caste man or coming
across a low caste man was considered pollution. Purification ceremonies were done to
permit her inside home. Love affair with lower castes (pratiloma), inter-dining and inter-
education were prohibited. The lower castes were denied temple-entry, particularly these
womenfolk, as they were said to be polluting and defying. Women were guarded carefully in
order to prevent the threat from the sexual attack of the lower caste male. To avoid this, the
system of child-marriage or pre-puberty marriage was introduced and access to education was
denied to girls⁵². The institution of marriage emphasized monogamous marriage for woman
but not for the twice born men⁵³. Simultaneously, women were not given the right to divorce.
All the *Smritis* disqualify the daughter from inheriting the property of the deceased father
and permit the son the right of inheritance⁵⁴. Dowry problem was chronic among this caste.
The evil practice of paying–accepting dowry made many poor. Brahmin girls remained
unmarried. Sometimes they took to religious service or educational service. Old Brahmin
women went on pilgrimage to sacred centres such as Kasi, Rameswaram, Haridwar, etc. Re-

⁴⁸ A man of higher caste married a woman of a lower caste it was called *anuloma marriage* and the woman of
higher caste married a man of lower caste it was called *pratiloma marriage*. Andre Beteille, *The Position of
Women in Indian Society* in Devaki Jain (ed.), *Indian Women*, Ministry of Information or Broad Casting,
Government of India, New Delhi, 1975, p. 65.
⁵⁰ Uma Chattravarthi, *Pennieya Parvaiyil Saathiyum Paalnilai Pahupadum*, Geetha.V. (Tr.), Bharathi
Puthahalayam, 2010, p. 43.
⁵⁴ Ibid.
marriage was not permitted even to infant widows\textsuperscript{55}. Those widows whose heads were tonsured remained in seclusion, maintaining strict abstinence, but sometimes fell prey to male members of the family. Children especially female children’s chorus stopped with the home and hearth. Brahmin Ladies went to clubs with the wives of the British officials and enjoyed dance and music performed by the dedicated girls. That was what the higher ups in the Brahmin ladies did to perpetuate their happiness. The following table shows the number of females per 1000 males during the early quarter of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin Tamil</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>1012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin Telugu</td>
<td>987</td>
<td>1010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin Malayalam</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vellala</td>
<td>1024</td>
<td>1032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balija, Kavarai</td>
<td>1019</td>
<td>1023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nayar</td>
<td>1090</td>
<td>1079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadar</td>
<td>1022</td>
<td>1040</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Brahmin sex ratio was very lower than the other caste people. It was due to the wide practice of child-marriage, widowhood, dowry system etc. among this caste.

**The non-Brahmins**

The second major division in the South Indian society was the non-Brahmins. They ranked below the Brahmins in social status but above the untouchables\textsuperscript{56}. They include the high caste Hindu non-Brahmins, the intermediaries and the lowest segment. They are said to be the sons of the soil of South India. They were mostly caste-Hindus. The main occupation of the non-Brahmins was cultivation and they were also involved in trade and commerce. The high caste non-Brahmins included the Mudaliars, the Vellalars, the Chettiars, the Pillaimars,


the Nadars, the Naickers, the Reddiars, the Balijas, etc. The intermediaries include the Makkulathor - Maravar, Kallar and Agamudaiyar- Nadar, Vanniar, etc. Lower to them in the category were the Kammalar, Fisherman, all other artisans etc. At the lowest ladder were the Pallar, Paraiyar and Chuckkiliyar (in Andhra Country). The Caste-Hindus were educated, influential and wealthy. They were the large land owners, particularly, the zamindars as well as the major group of peasants.

The Nair women in South Travancore had followed the matriarchal system and they possessed property rights. The Nambudiri Brahmins introduced patriarchal system in Kerala by sambhandam with the Nair women. There was a tradition among the Nambudiri Brahmins that only the eldest son should marry a girl of a Brahmin community. The remaining male members of a Brahmin community should have sex with Nair girl who were not allowed to dwell in Agraharam. Sage Adi Sankara’s mother was a Dravidian woman whereas father was a Nambudri Brahmin. The Nair women had a strong tradition of education and professional training. As a result there arose many segments among the Nambudiris, Nairs and Hybrid communities like Menon, Kurup, etc. Nair women considered co-habitation with Nambudiris meritorious as they believed that insemination of Nambudri blood was meritorious. Since their menfolk were warriors, the females maintained the property and acquired property from their paramours. What the Nambudiris in South Travancore did to the Nair women, the Nairs tried to do to their low caste women. With the wealth of the Nambudiri vagabonds, the Nair women led luxurious life pretending to be pure, chaste and charitable and tried to command respect from the low castes. The Nair

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59 Sambandam was union between a Nambudri Brahmin and a Nayar woman. It was later recognised as marriage under the Malabar customs. Kerala Patrika, calicut, March 17, 1894.
62 Ibid.
women were the only non-Brahmin community encouraged education of women in South India\textsuperscript{65}. But, the worst custom that prevailed among the non-Brahmin was that the Brahmin was the first man to co-habit with a non-Brahmin girl who attains her puberty. Women of non-Brahmins were concubines to Brahmins. She should fulfill the desire of the Brahmin when she was called for co-habitation. Otherwise, she would reach hell after her death\textsuperscript{66}.

Women of the upper caste non-Brahmins were more orthodox imitated the Brahmin women, looked into astrology, horoscope, omens and they would not allow pollution of their homes by the lower-lowest castes. They strictly observed untouchability, concept of purity and pollution. They prevented widow remarriages, inter-dining and inter-mingling. Any caste or sub-caste that wanted to raise its status or claim its origin from twice-born caste insists on pre-puberty marriage of girls and on forbidding remarriage of widows. Pure-blooded societies produced an excess of males as well\textsuperscript{67}.

**Depressed Class people**

Next to the non-Brahmins, there were the Depressed Class people. ‘Sudras were prominent among them’\textsuperscript{68}. They were within the fourth and the last class people and hence they were not \textit{dwijas} or twice-born\textsuperscript{69}. The Depressed classes include all the Hindus other than caste-Hindus\textsuperscript{70}. They were \textit{Vellalas, Naickers, Padaichaics, Nadars, Weavers, Carpenters, Reddis, Barbers, Potters, Fishermen, Kollar, Devangar and Sengunthar}\textsuperscript{71}. The Saiva Vellalas migrated from Tondaimandalam or from Cholamandalam to Tirunelveli region. They were the peasant class and known for maintaining orthodoxy and imitating the Brahminical way of life\textsuperscript{72}. They followed caste prejudices, taboos, dos and donots. They were

\textsuperscript{66} Kudi Arasu, Erode, November, 21, 1926.
\textsuperscript{68} ‘Sudra’ is a synonym for a slave and carries the implication that all Sudras must do all the manual work from which Brahmin alone were exempted by brahmanical doctrines, said Periyar.
\textsuperscript{70} G.O. No. 155, Legal Department, September 7, 1937, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{72} Maraimalai Adikal, \textit{Vellalar Nakarigam} (TL), Madras, 1927, p.24.
governed by the concepts of ritual purity and impurity, benevolence and malignance. Noboru Karoshima referred to the communities which were above Paraiyas viz., watchman, washer man, barbers, potters, goldsmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, oil-merchants, weavers, merchants and others. They were deprived of the privileges, rights and concessions which were enjoyed by the first two communities. The main reason for their low status in the society was that they gave importance to old sayings, blind beliefs, sastras, customs, traditions, meaningless rites, religious dogmas and scriptures. The Brahmins considered that Sudras had no right to marry. So, the wife of a Sudra is treated as a prostitute and concubine to the Brahmins.

The Untouchables

The untouchables were the fourth caste people. They were considered as outcaste and separated from the rest of the society namely the Brahmins and Non-Brahmins in religious and social terms. The most important among them were the Ezhavas, Pallans, Paraiyars and Pulaiyas. The other castes were Chuckkiliar and Cheruman. They were the lowest class people whose property is below the value of Rs.5/-.

The Pariahs and the Chuckkiliars formed a quarter of the total population. The following table shows the population of the untouchables by the Census of 1921

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the caste</th>
<th>1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adi Dravidas</td>
<td>50,015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chakkiliyan</td>
<td>549,807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheruman</td>
<td>248,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pallan</td>
<td>862,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parayan</td>
<td>2,337,036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Census Report 1921, p.158.

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74 Periyar E.V.Ramasamy, Declaration of war on Brahmin’s, SRPI, Chennai, p. 3.
77 Dubois Abbe J.A., Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, Henry Beauchamp (Tr.), Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1992, p. 82.
78 Ibid.
The sex-ratio among the Pallan, Paraiyan, Chakkiliyan, Cheruman and Iluvan during the Census Report of 1921 was 1062, 1044, 1047, 1092 and 1124 per thousand males respectively. Females outnumbered men in lower castes.

The Depressed classes were forced to live in the outskirts of the cities, in huts with thatched roofs, with very narrow and short doorways. During the reign of Rajaraja I, the Paraiyas were living in parai-cheri, tinda-cheri and were engaged in cultivation. They were also called Avarnas, (out of the varna) Panchamas (the fifth caste) and the chandalas (the carrion eaters) and they were suppressed by other sections of society and their condition was deplorable. The principle of untouchability was so acute in Southern India because of ‘distance pollution’. They could not maintain privacy. Sudras were treated like slaves or Dasis’ son and deprived of worshipping God, of possessing properties and of enjoying pleasure in this world. They were treated as chappals and not allowed to mingle with the other castes. Right to education, assembling, participating in worship, marriage processions and funeral rites and rituals and processions through the high-caste streets were denied. They were not allowed to use gold or silver ornaments, umbrellas and even shoes. Their women could not dress themselves at least in the modest ways. Mostly, men had to come out with nothing to cover their upper body and walk bare-footed. They were in the habit of taking off the cloth which covers the upper part of their bodies, tied it around their waists and stand with folded arms crossed on their chest while speaking to the higher caste men. Since they were denied the right to fetch water from the common wells, they had to walk miles together to fetch drinking water. There was a custom among the Brahmin that if a Brahmin marries a

79 The Census Report 1921, p.98.
81 Kudi Arasu, Erode, May 5, 1948.
82 Ibid., Erode, June 28, 1940.
Sudra girl, he is entitled to own her property. But, if a Sudra girl marries a Brahmin, she is not entitled to his property. So, she should become a pauper.\textsuperscript{85}

The sudras were called the ‘carrion eaters’ in a degraded way. They were compelled to carry away dead animals and clean the spots. Their women were treated immodestly. They were to meekly submit to the sensuous and sexual abuses of the caste-Hindus and even the so called Brahmins. They were ridiculed as utter black buffaloes, which are always found in mainly waterponds, signifying uncleanliness. Any deed or word of non-submission was taken to be the affront and the persons were beaten with bamboo rods or whipped. Under the shadow of darkness, the womenfolk were forced to have sex with their masters and carry their children in their womb.\textsuperscript{86}

The panchamas were not allowed to enter into the temple or to join the procession of any of the gods of the Brahmins. They were beaten if they breached this rule.\textsuperscript{87} In December 1930, the Kellar in Ramnad District imposed severe restrictions on the lower castes.\textsuperscript{88} Accordingly, ‘the Adi-Dravida women shall not be allowed to cover the upper portion of their bodies by clothes or ravikais or thavannies; and they shall not be allowed to use flowers or saffron paste’. Another prohibition imposed by the Kellar on the Adi Dravidas in the year 1931 was that Both the men and women of the Adi Dravidas should not wear golden jewels. Their women should carry water only in mud pots and not in copper or brass vessels. They should use only straw to carry the water pots and no clothes should be used for that purpose. Both men and women should work as slaves of Mirasdars (land lord) in their respective pannais (estates). They must work as coolies from 7 a.m to 6 p.m under the Mirasdars and their wages shall be Rs.0-4-0 per day for men and Rs.0-2-0 per day for women. They were mostly bonded labours unperpetually. They should not use Indian music (Melam, etc.) in their marriages and their celebrations. They must stop their habit of going on a horse in procession

\textsuperscript{87} Francis Buchanan, A journey from Madras Through Mysore, Canara and Malabar, 1807, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{88} G.O.No. 1536, Public (General) Department, October 20, 1932.
before tying the **thali** thread in marriage, and they must use their house doors as a palanquin for the marriage processions and no vehicle should be used by them for any purpose”\(^{89}\).

Thus, women of lower caste were exploited in labour as well as they were suppressed by male members not only of their own caste but also they were attacked sexually by the higher caste men\(^{90}\).

**The Muslims**

The Third group in Tamil Nadu was the Muslims. They were mostly populated in Malabar, South Kanara, the Deccan districts and Madras. The actual number of Muslims in the Presidency during the decade of 1921 was 2,865,285\(^{91}\). The Muslim population has risen by 3.7% during the decade from 1911 to 1921\(^{92}\). The Muslims and the Christians were regarded as inferior to the Brahmins and Nayars in Malabar but their degree of pollution was lesser than that of the other lower castes. The women of this community followed **purdah** system and lived a secluded life. Women of influential section acquired religious education from **Madarsa** School. The condition of Muslim women was better than that of the Hindu women because they had the right to properties and the permission for widow remarriage.

**The Indian Christians**

The second group alike the Muslims in the Tamil society during the colonial rule was the Indian Christians. They were largely converts from untouchables. Some of these people were toddy-trappers called Nadars and some were Vellalas\(^{93}\). Due to the missionary work, the women of converted Christians had an access to education and later they became teachers and created awareness among these people about their social and economical rights. The Christians are found in Tirunelveli, Trichnopoly, Madurai, Ramnad, Coimbatore and


\(^{90}\) Personal interview with S.V.Rajadurai, Co-ordinator, *Periyar* Chair, Bharathidasan University, Trichy, 11 a.m. 16.09.2010.


\(^{92}\) Ibid., p.58.

South Kanara. The actual number of Christians in the Madras Presidency during the decade 1921 was 1,380,672. The caste system, the poisonous weed, had become deep-rooted in our soil and has been causing havoc amongst the Tamils from the advent of the Aryans into Tamil Nadu.

The position of women in Tamil Nadu by the beginning of the 20th century was very pathetic and pitiable. They were subjects of subordination and subjugation. In the name of religion thousands of female children were dedicated to temple service and ultimately reached whoredoms called Devadasi, the servants of Gods and they were more of prostitutes than artists. Many young girls were taken to concubinage by petty chiefs, officials (polgars and zamindars), some of whom squandered the treasuries in unproductive luxury and became debtors to the British company. Many others acquired sexually transmitted diseases and died very young. Many of these young girls gave birth to children, which led to conflicts, intrigues and murders.

Women of Tamil Nadu, as their contemporaries elsewhere, were fond of gold, silver ornaments and silk sarees. High caste women enjoyed the privilege of beautifying themselves as dolls. Poor women languished in poverty and penury. At the lowest stratum were the begging and thieving women and the incurable disease infected women, just above them were the daily wage-earners, tillers of the soil, planters of the seedlings, weeding out women, harvesting women, winnowing women and waste drying women and the parathaiyar (prostitute). Just above them were housewives (homemakers) who were always fond of jewels, dress and flowers and just above them were the wealthy women, who enjoyed some liberty, but they were a microscopic minority. They loved to travel in palanquins, followed by edupiti (servants or slaves). Most of the edupitis were female transgenders. They sometimes lavished on rites, rituals, festivals and temple grants and other charities. To this group belong

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95 Revolt, Erode, June 30, 1929, P. 267.
the high caste women including the Brahmin women, who were steeped in orthodoxy, outdated caste practices and religious rites. Few of them were trained in the arts of singing and dancing and reading. Above them were the women of the ruling class. Though their position was subservient, they were comparatively better placed. They enjoyed some more liberty, a little more education, right to counselling, right to collecting dues and tributes. But, on the whole, the larger majority groped in ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, ill-health, over work, overburden, mal nutrition and unsafety. They had to meekly submit to male domination, drunkenness and humiliation. Illiteracy kept them always ignorant and superstitious. They were afraid of and very much affected by innumerable socio-religious practices. On the whole, women lost birth right, Self-Respect, self-esteem, honour, libery, dignity, individuality, etc.

Thus, woman in our country was not the better-half but the inferior bitter half of man. The law ordained her only as a slave of her father in girlhood, the slave of her husband in matrimony and the slave of her son if widowed. All these suppressions were endured by women helplessly. But, her only high ambition in life was child-bearing. Generally, the caste system was established to suppress the sexual rights of women. They became the possession of their husbands and had no right to control their pregnancy. They were taught to preserve culture, tradition and convention of their own caste by which they were unable to choose apt match for their life on account of implementing endogamous marriage strictly.

Political

By the beginning of the twentieth century Tamil Nadu formed the major part of the erstwhile Madras Presidency, which was made the largest Province in 1801, having Edward Clive, the son of Robert Clive, the first Governor of Presidency. It was formed out of the defeated and subjugated poligars, with the exception of the independent kingdoms of Ramnad and Pudukotai. It comprised the southern part of the present Orissa, largest portion of the

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present Andhra Pradesh with the exception of Hyderabad State and with the inclusion of Southern Karnataka and the Malabar region. It thus consisted of regions from the West coast to the East Coast. The headquarters of the Presidency was at Madras, the present Chennai, the office of which was situated at Fort St. George, with the college Fort St. George founded by Francis Whyte Ellis and others to train civil servants in vernacular languages and in the nuances of administration. The Governor of Madras held sway over all parts and nothing escaped his eyes\textsuperscript{101}. A military force was stationed at key places to watch and ward the movements by the rebels.

The raj did not directly interfere in the socio-religious matters unless situation warranted. They kept religion away from their politics since it was a sentimental issue\textsuperscript{102}. However they took necessary measures to keep communal flareups and caste conflagrations at bay. Any political uprising was dealt with sternness and with punitive measures\textsuperscript{103}.

Though the Governor of Madras was assisted by his councillors and criminal law and order was maintained by the police, justice was discharged by the judges of the courts. The Governor had the assistance of Collector of Districts who sometimes rose to the position of Governors, who in turn, became Viceroys\textsuperscript{104}.

Socio-economic measures such as laying roads, railways, tramways and waterways received the attention of the raj. The Presidency forming part of the larger area of India served as a land of raw materials and markets. Export of raw materials, shipping of ores and import of finished products, was a daily affair. Their boost to British industries ultimately did away with native industries, handicrafts and village industries. Towns and cities were linked with a network of conveyance for easy military and commercial commodities’ movement. On

\textsuperscript{101} Frontline, Madras, September 5, 2014, p.34.
\textsuperscript{102} Proclamation of Queen Victoria Act, 1858 gave the assurance to the Indians non-interference in religious matters.
\textsuperscript{103} The Freedom fighters of South Indian Rebellion vira pandya kattabomman, mardhu pandian were executed by the British.
\textsuperscript{104} Lord William Bentinck, the Governor of Madras, became the Governor-General of India and took steps for the abolition of sati and female infanticide.
the whole, the political structure of the Presidency was centralised completely under its control.

**Socio- Religious Reform Movement (Position of Women) In the Colonial Period:**

Women’s status had seen far-reaching changes during the colonial period. The Christian Missionaries who came to India with the advent of the Europeans in the 17th century for propagating the teachings of Jesus Christ identified and highlighted the evils of the indigenous society. Though the Missionaries came to India for conversion purpose they also did remarkable services for the economic and social upliftment of the natives. They criticised persistently the evils of Indian Society such as untouchability, suttee, animal sacrifice, idolatory ritualism, polytheism, infant marriage, and enforced widowhood. They also attacked polygamy and *devadasi* system and certain outdated customs. Hence, they were involved in imparting English Education to the Indians. By the Charter Act of 1813, Lord Macaulay allotted One Lakh Rupees for the spread of English Education to the Indians. The Missionaries were also permitted to start schools. With the passing of the Charter Act of 1813, many missionaries came to India. They involved themselves in both proselytization and provided education to girls and to the downtrodden people against the Code of Manu. Barthalomeau Ziegenbalg established the first separate school for girls at Tarangambadi. He introduced noon-meal scheme for those who studied in his school. It was also a residential school. As a consequence of the Missionaries work in the field of education, India had witnessed the rise of new Social group called the English educated intelligentia. Having constant contact with the revolutionary ideas of Europeans, the elitists began to take upon

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some social and religious characteristics of their own society with horror and disgust\textsuperscript{108}. Therefore, they desired not only to bring reforms for the eradication of existing social evils but also through progressive legislation to transform the structure of society with the cooperation of the British administrators\textsuperscript{109}.

One of the earliest reformers of India was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, (1772-1833) the father of Indian Renaissance, who was inspired by the work of Fr. William Carey, a Serampur Missionary, took ceaseless efforts for the abolition of sati system. By this system many young widows sacrificed their lives in the funeral pyre of their husbands. The custom began to gain popularity from c. 400 A.D\textsuperscript{110}. This heart-bleeding system took away the lives of innumerable widows. The hesitant ones were forced into the pyre or thrown into the pyre.

In the province of Madras, the step to abolish sati was first made by Mr.C.M.Lushington, the Magistrate of Tanjore and Trichinopoly in 1813 and in 1819 respectively\textsuperscript{111}. While recommending for its suppression, he stated, “I look upon this as inhuman practice; if tolerated, it is a disgrace to the British Government”\textsuperscript{112}. But the government authorized him to discourage sati that was practised in terms of persuasion alone\textsuperscript{113}. Meanwhile, the Bengal Government proposed an order against the Sastras and tradition which prohibits sati for the widows, who were pregnant. It also prohibited toxication for committing sati\textsuperscript{114}.

In 1819, Mr.Hume pressed for an enquiry to the Judicial Administration of India\textsuperscript{115}. I. Catton, the Magistrate of Tanjore, reported that the immolation of widows was a frequent

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\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{112} Judicial Consultation, date 2, February, 1830.

\textsuperscript{113} Judicial Despatches to England, Vol. III – Dispatch, date 1, March, 1815, Paragraph 93-94.

\textsuperscript{114} Baliga.B.S., op. cit., p.260.

\textsuperscript{115} Hansard, Vol. XXXIX, 1819, pp. 1000-1004 and see also Baliga.B.S., op. cit., p. 261.
practice in Tanjore and that the government officers have no means of preventing it\textsuperscript{116}. He regretted to observe 24 instances of this horrid sacrifice having occurred within 18 months in the district of Tanjore and within the jurisdiction of the Rajah around the fort of Tanjore\textsuperscript{117}. It became one of the few bad centres of the rite in the Indian Peninsula\textsuperscript{118}. Hence, Stephen Rumbold Lushington, the Governor of Madras, recorded a strong minutes recommending immediate abolition of \textit{sati} as soon as he received the Bengal Regulation XVII of 1820 prohibiting \textit{sati}. The system of \textit{sati} was abolished, despite the opposition of the conservatives, who perhaps thought that dying was better than living a life of shame being a widow. Hence, the conservatives in Bengal submitted a letter with the signature of 125 persons to Lord William Bentinck, who became the Governor-General of India in 1827 to reconsider the steps for its abolition for the sake of religion. But, counter-demonstrations were also made by the Hindu liberals and the Christian population. Finally, the Regulation for the abolition of \textit{sati} was passed on 4\textsuperscript{th} December, 1829\textsuperscript{119} and put an end to horrible practice of sati.

Inspite of the abolition of \textit{sati} in 1829, it was practised in Tamil Nadu till 1855. After the death of Shivaji II, the last Maratha ruler, all his wives committed \textit{sati} in October 1855 by breaching the law\textsuperscript{120}. The practice of \textit{sati} prevailed among all the sections of society and they were worshipped by constructing memorial stones in different parts of Tirunelveli district\textsuperscript{121}. One strange event that took place in Tirunelveli in 1876 was that a widow dug a pit inside her house, filled it with sandalwood and dressed herself as a bride; shut the doors, lit the pile and leapt in\textsuperscript{122}. In 1907, Hindu Nesan expressed that \textit{sati} has been put down by force.

\textsuperscript{116} Extract from the Diary of the Second Assistant Collector of Tanjore for the month of June 1821, date 12, July 1821, pp. 2047-2051.
\textsuperscript{117} Edward Thompson, Suttee- A Historical and Philosophical enquiry into the Hindu rite of widow-burning, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London 1928, p.57.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p. 61.
\textsuperscript{121} jeyaviradevan.C., \textit{Op. cit.} p. 64.
Another Social Reformer who championed the cause of women was Jyotiba Govind Rao Phule (1827-90). He belonged to a low caste in Maharashtra and started Anti-Brahmin Movement and he fought against the supremacy of the Brahmins. He founded Satya Shodak Samaj to uplift the low caste people. To remove the problems of widows, he founded an orphan home for the widows and their children\(^{123}\). He introduced reformed marriage system known as Satyashodhak Marriage, which was anti-ritualistic, anti-Brahminical, and anti-priestly, in order to remove the domination of Brahmins. He thought that the problem of subordination of women was only due to patriarchy and Brahminism. Phule’s anti-Brahmin movement and rationalism encouraged the reformers of South India like Periyar to start Self-Respect Movement to create Self-Respect among the Tamilians, especially the depressed community.

The society in Madras Presidency was so much caste-ridden and ‘it was dominated by the Brahmins and their paraphernalia’. The Socio- Religious Reform movement in the Madras Province was started in the South in the 17\(^{th}\) century by Vaikunda Swamikal and Narayana Guru and in the North Tamil Nadu by Ramalinga Adigalar.

In the South Travancore, the most populous Nadar community was considered as one of the polluting castes just like the Pallars and Pariahs. Though they were hard-working and industrious people they were held in positions inferior to the Sudras. They were illiterates and their right to literacy was denied by the Nambudris and the Nairs, the dominant castes in Kerala. They were denied the right to enter into public schools, law courts and public buildings. More over the food items which were touched by them were considered polluted and not used by the upper castes. Besides, they were not allowed to carry water pots in their hips, but only on their heads. Economically, they were suppressed by heavy taxation like poll tax, tax on palmyrah trees, kuppa tax on house etc. If they were unable to pay the arbitrary taxes imposed by the government, arbitrary methods were followed in extraction\(^{124}\).

For instance, women in the absence of their respective husbands were tortured by making them have rice pestle twisted into their hair or a huge stone was placed on four small pebbles on their backs making them stand all the time in an unnatural position\textsuperscript{125}. Another persecution inflicted on women in Travancore state was the imposition of mulaivari (breast tax). Accordingly, girls who attained the age of sixteen should pay mulaivari up to the age of 35. The way of collecting taxes was very suppressive and inhuman in nature. An Ezhava woman, who was unable to pay such disgraceful and oppressive tax, cut her breasts and threw it away. Finally, she lost her life in front of the officials of dominant class when they came for collecting taxes. Even today this place was known as Mulachirambu\textsuperscript{126}. Socially, women of Nadar community were not allowed to use upper cloth or to wear dress above their waist. Besides, they were not allowed to wear jewels and ornaments\textsuperscript{127}. They were degraded and made to expose their bosoms. That shows the sensuous and sexual mental state of the upper castes.

The Namboodri women too were not free from this awkward practice. They had to keep open their bosom to the male members of the family and any (upper caste Namboodri) relatives visiting their houses. They were called the Andaijanams (kept at homes only, no way to express their feelings but only to show their bodies to the male members). The Karamavan\textsuperscript{128} (taraward head man) can have sexual contact with any member of the Namboodri girls who were tortured by the practice of Smarthavicaracu (an illegal practice to prevent the revelation of the truth about her contact with outcaste man or the truth of having seen/approached such a man). It has become widely prevalent among them from the days of Adi Sankar in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. The Gods and Goddesses of the Nambudiris and Nairs could remain without dress and give sight to the ignorant upper caste men and women,

\textsuperscript{125} Ponnus, R., Sri Vaikunda Swamigal and the Struggle for Social Equality in South India, Ram Publishers, Madurai, 2000, pp. 29-32.
\textsuperscript{127} According to Brabminical tradition, the lower caste women were prohibited by Parasurama to wear upper clothes and jewels.
\textsuperscript{128} Kerala Patrika, Calicut, 17.03.1894, in NNPR, January to December 1894, p.87.
cohabit with any number of supposed to be divine figures, embrace and beget any number of children through any sage or seer. It was then not a sin, but meritorious and a rare opportunity of divine dispensation. This is how the upper caste women were either fooled or they fooled their male members. While the Nambudiris cohabit with the low caste Nair women, it was not polluting and defiling. The Nair women found the supposed divinity in such acts. As Prof. P. Sundaram Pillai says time is awaiting the processes of the upper would have to come down and the down has to go up.

Muthukuttiswamigal, popularly known as Vaikuntha Swamigal (1808-1851 AD) was considered one of the earliest reformers of South Travancore. He was the forerunner in sowing the seeds of revolution to establish equality and social justice. He introduced the system of ‘inter-dining’ to establish equalitarian society and to remove untouchability. He also established Samathuva Samajam in 1833 and Nizhal thankals for propagating his principles of equality, Self-Respect, unity and co-operation among the unprivileged classes and for feeding the poor people. He encouraged women to develop courage and boldness. He compared women’s mind to a door which will safeguard their chastity i.e ‘kattrakathavu polae karpum manakathavu’.

The feelings of Nadars were also aroused by the principle of Self-Respect taught by Vaikunda Swamigal, who also started the Upper Cloth Movement, which took place in three stages from 1822-1858 and gave a clarion call to the females of the Nadar community to breach the uncivilised and barbarous tradition and encouraged them to wear upper cloth inorder to cover their bosoms. It was an offence for the unprivileged women to cover her bosom while appearing before the higher castes. Women of Nadar community considered the

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restrictions as a sort of insult and disgrace. Therefore, the Nadars agitated for their right to cover the bosoms of their women.

Besides, the Missionaries like Thomas Mault, Charles Meat, Samuel Mateer, etc. took great pains to uplift and free the so-called defiling women from bondage and for wearing upper cloth. The timely interference and the pressure of Sir Charles Trevelyan, the Governor of Madras, in the matter of uncivilised attitude and shameful activities of Queen of Travancore towards her own sex, changed her to issue a Royal Proclamation on 26th July 1859. It read: “There is no objection to Shanar Women either putting on a jacket like the Christian Shanar Women or to Shanar Women of all creeds dressing in coarse cloth, (Katti sila) and tying around with it as the Mukkuvattikal (low caste fisher women) do, or to cover their bosoms in any manner whatever; but not like women of high castes”.

Ultimately, Vaikunta Swamigal’s Upper Cloth Movement or thol silai porattam successfully established the basic right of women to wear upper cloth in order to live a dignified and Self-Respectful life. The upper cloth movement was a turning-point in the social and political history of Travancore. It formed the basis of radical changes that took place in the first half of the twentieth century. This movement created not only awakening and unity among both the converted and the Hindu Nadar community but also brought social upliftment among them. This movement emboldened the latest reformers to take up the cause of women and liberate them from social and religious oppression.

Sri Narayana Guru (1854-1928), a socio-religious reformer introduced a Religion of Humanism to bring equality and unity among the people and to remove untouchability because the savarnas were restricted to enter even the streets in which the temples were located by the Nambudiri Brahmins who imposed various degrees of pollution like

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134 Ibid.
untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability\textsuperscript{136}. He installed a Siva idol and consecrated a temple of worship for all people without any discrimination on the basis of caste, sex or religion. He advocated the principle of one God, one religion and one caste to bring unity, equality and well being of mankind\textsuperscript{137}. He also established Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam to establish a casteless society in 1903\textsuperscript{138}.

Ayyankali (1863-1941), was one of the social reformers from South Travancore led the Pulayas to breach the tradition of denying access to public roads. To uphold the chastity of women, he instigated and encouraged Pulaya women to wear upper cloth for covering their breasts. He removed ‘kallumalai’, the garland of stone, the symbol of slavery and a badge of bondage. In 1904, he founded Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham to redress the grievances of people besides pulayas. He breached the customary ban of a dharsan of the Rajah on Arat\textsuperscript{139}, which was denied to the untouchables. He also started a movement to provide modern education and vocational training to the untouchables and their womenfolk. As education was a panacea for all the evils of women, Ayyankali established several schools for untouchable girls in vehement opposition made by the higher caste\textsuperscript{140}.

What went on in South Travancore had impact on some right-thinking, radical-minded men in Tamil Nadu. The Siddhars\textsuperscript{141} who are said to have lived between 14\textsuperscript{th} century and 19\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., Agastiyar is said to be a Siddha. Saint Tirumular, the Father of Tamil Siddhar, proclaimed ‘one God and one Community’\textsuperscript{142}. The Siddhars questioned the

\textsuperscript{138} Sathish, V., (ed), Mahatma Ayyankali: Interface of an Ara of Social Resurgence and Resistance, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, p.xxii.
\textsuperscript{139} Arat, sacred bathing, was an annual royal procession practiced in Travancore. Sadasivan.K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.xiv.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} A Siddhar was a person who had attained Siddhir, a magical and occult power. They were proficient in alchemy and indigenous herbal and chemical medicine. They also produced images of Gods and prepared navapashana (“the nine poisons”) by using their occult powers. They were against idol worship. They opposed caste system and vociferously attacked its attendant evils like social segregation and colour complexions of the high-caste Brahmins. They were saivite and non-Brahminical. They condemned superstition, fanaticism and rituals of Brahmins. Premakumar, G., \textit{Genesis of the Dravidian Movements in the Madras Presidency 1852-1917}, an unpublished Thesis submitted to Manonmanium Sundaranar University, March, 2001. pp.164-165.
\textsuperscript{142} Tirumular, a great mystic saint, is popular for his transfiguration and transmigration of soul.
birth and sex based discrimination on the basis of birth and tried to establish equality in the society. Sivavakkiar, the fourteenth Saivite Saint questioned the caste hierarchy in the society. He asks, “What is the difference between an untouchable and a Brahman woman? Is there any difference identified on their flesh, skin or bone? Does the sexual desire of the untouchable differ from that of a Brahman woman?”  

Pampatti Siddhar, caustic critic of casteism, warned a man that if he fell in sexual desire he would perish. The Siddha propaganda of a casteless society, against untouchability, inequality, ritual and priestly hegemony too had their impact on their radical thinkers. This tradition had its impact on some later day thinkers like Ayothee Thass Pandithar.

Pandithamani Ayothee Thass (1854-1914), a Siddha physician, a rationalist and the grandfather of Dravidian Movement was a popular person to arouse socio-cultural awakening in Tamil land before the rise of the Non-Brahmin Movement. The writings and novel ideas of Ayothee Thass brought new awakening in the subalternal struggle for social justice and identity. He founded Dravida Mahajana Sangam in 1881 to liberate the Dravidians from the clutches of the Brahmins. He questioned caste hegemony, untouchability and subjugation of women through his weekly, Oru paisa Tamilan later rechristened as Tamilan. He spearheaded a campaign for education among the untouchables and women.

Masilamani, an associate of Ayothee Thass wrote several articles for Tamilan condemning

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143 உண்மையின் குறைவு பொருள்கள் பொருள் குறைவுகள்?
144 காண்டை செரியாக பொருள்கள் மாறுவது?
145 உண்மையின் குறைவு பொருள்கள் பொருள் குறைவுகள்?
146 உண்மையின் குறைவு பொருள்கள் பொருள் குறைவுகள்.
147 Kovartan,T., Cittar Padalkal, Poombuhar Pasaram, Madras, 1976, p.7.
148 Siddhar Padalkal, Sivavakkiyar poem, 35.
149 Aloysius.G. Thoughts of Ayodhi Dhasar, (TI), Folklore Research Centre, Palaymkottai, 1999, p.692 and see also Tamilan, Madras, July 3, 1912.
the four fold divisions of society as unjust and arbitrary\textsuperscript{151}. He observed the effects of caste on women as cruel. He criticized the sexual politics of Brahmanism and illtreatment of women including the upper caste women. He wrote different articles in Tamilan about the wretched condition of upper-caste Hindu widow. He found that the subordination of women, especially the Shudras and the Panchamas, were due to Brahmin dominance\textsuperscript{152}. The rational ideas of Ayothee Thass later influenced the self-respector in Tamil Nadu\textsuperscript{153}.

Among other reformers, who criticised the caste system, untouchability, idol worship, seclusion of women, the most pioneering one was St. Ramalingar of Vadalur, who worked to create equality in society. Ramalinga Adigalar (1823-1874 AD), better known as Arul Prakasa Vallalar, was the forerunner in introducing socio-religious reform in Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century. He wanted to establish casteless and egalitarian society through religious reforms for the emancipation of the downtrodden people. He introduced simple method of worshipping God. He condemned idol worship. He introduced Samarasa Sudha Sanmarkaneri to bring religious co-operation among heterogeneous people\textsuperscript{154}. He established Sathiya Dharma Salai in 1867 at Mettu Kuppam near Vadalur for feeding the poor in a way of eradicating starvation and hunger\textsuperscript{155}.

In 1865, Vallalar founded Samarasa Sudha Sanmargha Sangha for spreading his ideals of bringing unity and harmony among the public as well as establishing casteless society\textsuperscript{156} without any discrimination even between men and women. His famous works were Thiru Arutpa and Arut Perunjothi Agaval\textsuperscript{157}. As Vallalar was an ardent lover of truth, equality, and humanism he objected to the enslavement of women. He always had pity on all creatures.“உண்மையை மனிதந்து செய்து மனிதை மனிதானை வழங்குங்க” (whenever I happened to see weak

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid. 95-96.
\textsuperscript{154} Tamilarasu, Madras, April 16, 1993, pp.24-29.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Tamilarasu, Madras, April 16, 1993, pp.24-29.
seedlings, I felt pity and I was unhappy)¹⁵⁸. Vallalar saw God in Oli (light), which is always burning in flame. He pointed out to the uselessness of idol worship. He preached and propagated co-existence and cooperation. “All world orders meet together” was his words of equality¹⁵⁹. Women received special attention in his writings and organisations. He insisted on women’s education for their true emancipation¹⁶⁰. He advocated widow’s remarriage for removing the deplorable condition of widows.

G. Subramania Iyer (1855-1916)

G. Subramania Iyer spearheaded the social reform movement in Tamil Nadu in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He advocated widows’ remarriage for removing the pitiable condition of the widows and to provide rehabitaiton. He opposed child-marriage and strived hard for raising the Age of marriage to 18 years for girls¹⁶¹. To create awakening among the public, he started The Hindu, a weekly on September 20, 1878. He attacked the Hindu joint-family system as it suppressed the individual freedom and led to the subordination of women. It prohibits competency and encourages selfishness instead of developing public spirit among them. He extended co-operation to Behramji Malbari for passing the Age of Consent Act in 1891.

Subramania Bharathi (1882-1921): A Poet-Thinker of Social Emancipation:

A Brahmin Rebel

Bharathi was one of the revolutionary social reformers and a leading Tamil poet. He crusaded against the injustice done to the Indians by the British and the injustice done to Indian women by traditions, customs and male chauvinism. He questioned the enslavement of women. He propagated revolutionary thoughts for the liberation of women from all traditional shackles through his writings¹⁶². He published his rational ideas in papers like

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¹⁵⁸ Thiru Arutpa, 87:30.
¹⁶² बाहेरम्य पुरुषांनी वेदांताच्या आर्थिक व सामाजिक धोत्रांजनात व्ययावस्थेनुसार विनियोजित विभाजनांची मूल मान्यता. Bharathiya Kavithaigal, Pen Viduthalai -45.
Swadesamitran, Bala Bharatha, India and Chakravardhini. The most notable and inspiring song of Bharathi to uplift women from traditional behaviour is *Pudumaippen*. He compared the subjugation of women with the subjugation of our mother land. He wrote the articles with fervour, vigour and passion for the liberation of the suppressed women. He stated that education is the main requirement for women to liberate themselves from all sorts of shackles. He also advocated that the custom and tradition which degraded women should be burnt. Since he was against sexual discrimination he emphasised common chastity for both sexes. He was infavour of women taking part in politics and becoming members in law-making body to enact laws. He viewed that this world would flourish in knowledge when both men and women are treated equally.

Bharathidasan (1891-1964): The Enlightened non-Brahmin Rebel

Bharathidasan is one of the pioneers of the women’s liberation movement and an ardent advocate of self-respect. He has relentlessly waged war on evils like female infanticide, child-marriage, widowhood, and dowry system which are all gross injustice done to women. He widely propagated the idea of widow remarriage. Since he had no faith in arranged marriage he strongly advocated love marriage ‘for the elimination of communal, racial and cultural discrimination’. As a rationalist, he states that a nation will never be free until women are emancipated. So, he wished that women should be permitted to enjoy all the privileges like men. He also clearly states that an uneducated woman is just an arid waste

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163 *Bharathiyar Kavithaigal*, Murasu- 10
166 *Bharathiyar Kavithaigal*, Pudumai Pen -4.
land whereas an educated lady is a fertile land\textsuperscript{170}. He is a crusader against female infanticide and welcomed the birth of female baby to remove the superstitious advantages in the society\textsuperscript{171}. He also wrote \textit{Kudumba Villakku} and \textit{Irunda Veedu} to highlight the virtues of ideal educated woman and the disadvantages of an illiterate lethargic lady to the society respectively. He was the first ever Tamil poet who ever advocated family planning and birth control for the real emancipation of women\textsuperscript{172}.

Women in the ancient Tamil Country played a vital role in socio-economic, religio-cultural and political life. Not only were they equal partners in married life but also they shared work with men in economic life in the physiographic regions. They enjoyed the simple life with nature and within nature by giving importance to the principles of humanism, secularism and universalism. But, the advent of the Brahmans and brahminical culture into the Tamil country converted the life of Tamils into a complicated and ritualistic one. The introduction of caste system and all its attendant evils degraded the life of women and reduced them to weak submission of men. To liberate women from all sorts of shackles, there arose quiet a number of socio-religious reformers and radical thinkers in Tamil Country. One such radical reformer who analysed the whole problems of women from cradle to graveyard was \textit{Periyar} who tried to root out all the social attendant evils as a destructionist only.

For this, \textit{Periyar} started the \textbf{Self-Respect Movement} to instill liberty, equality, fraternity and self-respect among the Tamils to crusade against the caste system in order to bring total revolutionary changes in the society.

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\textsuperscript{170} குன்றிருந்து குழக்கில் பார்க்கும்! ஆடுவிதையில் பெருந்தான் தேய்வம்; ஋ன்று பெருந்தான் கண்டுசெய்திக் கோளைக்கு!\
\textsuperscript{171} குரு குருக்கு கை மாதிரப் மாட்சு மாட்சு. \textit{Bharathidasan Kavithaikal}, Chennai, 1995, p.96.\
\textsuperscript{172} போர்யுக்கு போய்க்குறும் போய்க்குறும் போய்க்குறும் ஆடுஞ்ச போய்க்குறும் போய்க்குறும் போய்க்குறும் - கோரை. \textit{Bharathidasan Kavithaikal}, Chennai, 1995, p.396.\
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