Chapter III

Caste Structure and Practices
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CASTE STRUCTURE AND PRACTICES

The Periyakottai Panchayat is the refuge for conservatism and orthodoxy because it is the place where caste has taken up deep roots and its ramifications are numerous. Each caste widely differs from another in the mode of ceremonials and in the way of life. The dominant and higher castes zealously preserve their traditional way of life even to the extent of cooking or serving food in a particular manner. The Brahmins, the highest caste in the Hindu society, occupy pre-eminent position. The separate residential area of a village they live is known as agraharam. The Brahmins are debarred from tilling the soil. The Mukkulathors, the collective name for Kallars and Agamudaiyars, once a warrior caste, are a dominant caste in the village. The Chettiar are the trading and mercantile caste. They are commonly known as Vaisyas. They have a set aversion for government service, civil or military, especially the latter. The Kammalar are artisan caste. They are called Panchala. The name Panchala is given to them as people of five distinct trades- gold smithy, black smithy, copper and brass smithy, carpentry and stone mason. Their services are very essential to all the caste people. The menial caste people are Untouchables. They are called by various names- Depressed Classes, Adi-Dravidas, Harijans, Panchamas, Parayas, Pallas, Arunthathis, and Scheduled Castes. They live in the outskirts of the village called cheri.

Higher Castes-Gurukkal

The Brahmins are the priestly community. They are distributed all over the state. They are also called Adi Saiva Brahman, Adi Saiva Bhattar, Sivachariyar, Brahmin, Bhattar and Gurukkal. The Gurukkal worships Lord Dhakshanamurthy (Lord Shiva) as their Guru. In Mohanur Village of Periyakottai Panchayat, the total number of Brahmin population consists of 12 male and 12 female, a total of 24 persons.

The Gurukkal are strict vegetarians. Most of them do not eat even garlic or onion. Their staple food is rice. They consume available pulses and vegetables, milk and milk products and fruits. They use ground nut and gingelly oil for cooking. They are regular drinkers of coffee and tea. They observe fasting on festive days. Most of them chew betel and use snuff.

Puberty rites (rudhu shanthi or manjal neerattu vizha) are observed for Gurukkal girls. Puberty pollution is observed for three days. The marriage rituals of the Gurukkal are like those of the Brahmins. All marriage rituals, including the consummation ceremony, are conducted at the bride’s home, normally followed by a feast.

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The Gurukkal adhere to community endogamy and *gotram* and also *pravaram* exogamy\(^{10}\). They prefer consanguineous marriages. Marriages between cross – cousins as well as between maternal uncle and niece are quite common among them. Only adult marriages are permitted. Marriage alliances are fixed by negotiation. Monogamy is the marital norm, but polygamy is also allowed if the first wife is barren or unfit for conjugal life. *Mangalasutram*, and *metti* are the symbols of marriage. Dowry is paid, both in cash and kind. Dissolution of marriage has no social sanction among the Gurukkal. Widowers alone may remarry but not widows\(^{11}\).

The Gurukkal community observes the pre-delivery *seemantham* ritual for a pregnant woman during the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy. The woman delivers at her natal home. Birth delivery is deemed to be pollution. On the eleventh day, both the mother and child are bathed ceremonially. On the same day, *ayush homam, jatakakarma* and *namakarana* are performed for the child. They tonsure a child at the temple of their *kuladeivam* (family deity) after one year. *Vidyabhyasam* is observed during its fifth year. The *upanayanam* would be performed for boys at any age between five and nine. After that the boy was expected to recite the *Gayatri mantra* every day. Now, *upanayanam* is sometimes performed just before marriage. After *upanayanam* the Gurukkal undergoes initiation (*deeksha*), making him eligible to perform temple rituals\(^{12}\). The *deeksha namam* (name given at the time of initiation)...

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deeksha) is always selected from one of the five poses of Lord Siva, such as sajjojatam, vamadevam, aghoram, tatpurusam, and eesanamam. Soon after taking deeksha, the boy starts Siva puja by chanting panchakshari mantra\textsuperscript{13}. After upanayanam and before the age of ten, they initiate arte samayam. In their fifteenth and seventeenth years, they conduct vishesham. After eighteen years and before marriage, they enter into nirvanam. After marriage they go on to acharya abhishekam and asrabishekam (advanced initiation rites). Only those who are married and have undergone acharya abhishekam are eligible to perform rituals in the sanctum sanctorum of temples\textsuperscript{14}.

Nuclear families predominate among the Gurukkal. In order to respect the elders, the daughter–in-law shall not appear before her father–in-law. They keep relationship with brothers-in-law and younger sisters-in-law. All sons share parental property equally. The eldest son succeeds his father as head of the family.

Gurukkal women are very orthodox. They perform a variety of vratas (fasts), such as Gowri vratam and Mahalakshmi vratam, for the prosperity of their families. In addition to household work, they participate in social functions, religious activities and unlike the other Brahmans\textsuperscript{15}, both men and women undergo deeksha (initiation ceremony). Women too worship their kuladeivam every morning and evening like their men. All household decisions are

\textsuperscript{13} Bahadur, K.P., Caste Tribes a Culture of India, vol.II, ESS ESS, Delhi, 1977, p.107.
\textsuperscript{15} Sherring, M.A., Hindu Tribes and Castes, Vol. I, Cosmo, Delhi, 1974, pp.4-5.
taken after having consultations with them. Women have a status equal to that of their men. The Gurukkal are highly Sanskritised and perform all major samskaras as prescribed in scriptures in the style of Bhodayana sutram. The Smartha Brahman is their sacred specialist.

The Gurukkal cremate their dead. For those who have taken deeksha, a ritual called pitramediak samskarum (removing Lord Siva from the corpse) is performed before cremation. The asthi is collected on the following day and disposed of in the sea or a river. They observe nityakarma like the other Brahmins. Dasaham or karumathi is performed on the tenth day. On the eleventh to thirteenth day, the sapindeekaranam, grehyam and subhasweekaranam are observed respectively. Navagraha homam, punyahavachanam and dasadanam are performed on subha sweekaranam day. With that, death pollution ends. Thithi (annual ceremony) is observed for the deceased and the ancestors are worshipped. They perform tarpana for the ancestors on amavasai days. They are very orthodox and observe auspicious timings in their daily activities. They try to follow strictly the scriptures and agamas.

The Gurukkal mainly hold the position of temple priests. The Gurukkal at major pilgrim centers are comparatively more affluent than those in village temples. A few of them are dependent upon

20. Interview with Senthil, *op.cit*
on manyams (land donated to the temple). Their main source of income is the dakshina (offerings) offered by the devotees at the temple. They are divided into two occupational divisions, viz, periyapattam (those who perform puja in the sanctum sanctorum) and chinnapattam (those who arrange all the material for performing puja, such as flower, prasadam (food offered to God) and sacred water. The periyapattam are more affluent than the chinnapattam.

The Gurukkal do not have any traditional caste councils. But at major temples, the Gurukkal have sabhas to settle disputes related to the temple and to work for the welfare of the temple priests. Some of them are adhyanbattar or sadakachariar (those who recite scriptures and agamas) while others are ganapadigal (those who are proficient in the Vedas). The traditional temple sabhas play a vital role in organizing temple fairs and festivals.

The Gurukkal belong to the Saiva sect of Hindu religion. They give preference to the agamas, particularly the Saivagama. The Gurukkal cherish oral tradition. Women sing folk songs during rituals and festivals. They engage Isai Vellalar to play music on those occasions.

Traditionally, the Gurukkal accept food only from the Brahmin. But the other Brahmins do not accept cooked food from the Gurukkal and do not dine with the Gurukkal. The Gurukkal exchange uncooked

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food items and water with other Brahmins\textsuperscript{24}. They share water sources with all, but cremation grounds only with Brahmins. They hold important position in organizing and officiating in the temple festivals. The service castes, such as Ambattan, Vannan and Melakaran, are being engaged during their rituals. Some of them hold lands and some are Sanskrit scholars, teachers and administrators\textsuperscript{25}.

While some of the Gurukkal send their children to regular schools, many still send their children to the \textit{agama} schools. They patronise both indigenous and modern medicare facilities. They do not favour modern family planning methods. They have access to all modern amenities.

**Dominant Castes**

(i) Kallar

The Periyakottai Panchayat Kallars are popularly known as \textit{Eesanattu} Kallars. The \textit{Eesanattu} Kallars are also known as \textit{Isanganadu} Kallar and \textit{Visanganadu} Kallar. The community is named after the \textit{nadu} (territory) division to which they belong\textsuperscript{26}. The literal meaning of \textit{Eesanadu} means eastern country\textsuperscript{27}. The \textit{Eesanattu} Kallars are mainly inhabitants of Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli districts\textsuperscript{28}. The Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallars are also known as Gandarvakkottai Kallars\textsuperscript{29}. Their name is derived from Periyakkottai Panchayat, Gandarvakkottai taluk in Pudukkotti district, to which they

\begin{itemize}
    \item[24.] Ramesh Chandra, \textit{op.cit.}, p.31.
    \item[25.] Interview with Mani., \textit{Op cit.}.
    \item[29.] Singh, K.S., \textit{op cit.}, p.540.
\end{itemize}
belong. The literal meaning of Kallar is king. The Kallars are also a branch of Mukkulathor, the people of three communities or three *Kulams* (Kallar, Maravar and Agamudaiyar).

The Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar have different family titles like Balandar, Kaalingarayar, Kadavarayar, Koraiyar, Kuzhanthirar, Mazhavarayar, Mandalavar, Mangalar, Visathevar, Narangiyar, Pilirayar, Raangaiyar, Rayamundar, Saanayar, Sampatiyar, Chozhagar and Vaandayar. These titles indicate that they belonged to the Chola region. The community is identified with the local level tradition. They speak the dialect of Tamil within family and kin groups. They converse in Tamil with others. They use the Tamil script for writing, reading and learning. They are aware of the varna system and they belong to Sudra social division. They claim superior status in this Panchayat over the Koravan, Parayan, Ambattan, Valayan and Vannan communities. In Periyakkottai, Mohanur and Kothakapatti villages of Periyakkottai Panchayat, the total number of Kallar population consists of 326 males and 324 females, a total of 650 persons.

The Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar are non-vegetarians, but do not eat pork. Their staple food is rice and they use all varieties of pulses. They use groundnut oil for cooking. They eat all varieties of vegetables and consume roots and tubers, fruit and

vegetables. Consumption is moderate in the community\textsuperscript{37}. They consume milk and milk products. Men take alcoholic drinks occasionally\textsuperscript{38}. They smoke \textit{beedis}, cigarettes and chew betel and some of them use snuff \textsuperscript{39}. The attitude of the Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar is favourable towards formal education but drop outs occupy significant place at primary and secondary levels due to socio economic conditions. They show a favorable attitude towards modern medicare and family planning. They enjoy all civic amenities\textsuperscript{40}.

The major source of income of the Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar is income from land. The land is managed by individual proprietors. Most of them are small farmers. Cultivation is their primary occupation. Their secondary occupations include business, horticulture, employment in government and private services, self – employment, masonry and labour. They transact business in cash. Landlessness had caused an increase in the number of agricultural labourers, industrial labourers and daily wage casual labourers\textsuperscript{41}.

Puberty rites are observed for adolescent Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar girls. When a girl attains puberty, she is secluded for sixteen days. On the sixteenth day function, a ritual bath is given and thereafter she is allowed to enter the house. On that occasion, she is given presents by relatives and friends and blessed by the elders. Particularly maternal uncle in the family has a dominant role. Her maternal

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Ibid}, 16 August 2005
\item Interview with Mani, \textit{Farmer}, Kothakappatti Village, 9 July 2005.
\item \textit{Ibid}.
\item \textit{Ibid}.
\end{enumerate}
uncle presents her a sari, blouse, cosmetics, fruits and flowers on that day and a grand feast is arranged for the invitees and relatives.

The status of the Periyakottai Panchayat Kallar women is lower than that of their men but they hold important positions in the family. Generally, women do not have rights to hold ancestral property. They do not have decision-making power in villages but they do participate in decision-making in family matters. Women contribute considerably to family income. Women participate in agricultural operations, animal husbandry and other economic activities. They also participate in social and religious functions along with family members.

Nuclear families predominate over extended families among the Kallars. Generally cordial relationships are maintained with brothers in law, sisters in law, grand parents and other family members. Sometimes relationships are avoided with mother in law, son in law, daughter in law and father in law. They follow the Hindu law of inheritance. The eldest son of the family succeeds as the head of the family.

In the Kallar family, the nichayathartham (betrothal) is held at the bride’s residence. The alliance is formally confirmed with the exchange of betel leaves and areca nuts by the elders. The marriage ceremony is at the bridegroom’s residence or in a kalyana

43. Saminathan, V., Rural Farm Women and their Upliftment in Tamil Nadu, South Indian History Congress, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, 2005, pp.309-312.
45. Interview with Ganapathi, Farmer, Periyakkottai Village, 1 September 2005.
46. Interview with Arunachalam, Farmer, Periyakkottai, 6 August 2005.
mantapam (Marriage Hall) \(^{47}\). The important rituals observed during the marriage ceremony are tying the thali\(^{48}\) (sacred thread) around the neck of the bride by the bridegroom and exchange of garlands by the bride and the bridegroom. The elders then bless the couple. The bridegroom’s family arranges the wedding feast. The consummation ceremony shall be conducted at the bride’s residence\(^{49}\). They observe normally the monogamy system but occasionally they indulge in polygamy, including remarriage.

Dowry is paid in both cash and kind\(^{50}\). Divorce is customarily not permitted. Nowadays, judicial approval is given on grounds of maladjustment or cruelty. Compensation is given to the aggrieved party. Children are the responsibility of either parent. Widows are not allowed to remarry. However, widowers and divorcees of either sex may remarry\(^{51}\).

The Periyakottai Panchayat Kallar is an endogamous community. Exogamous clans govern their marital alliance. Marriage with other Kallar groups and also with the Maravar and Agamudaiyar take place, especially among the well to do and the urbanized. Consanguineous marriage between cross cousins and maternal uncle and niece are allowed. Boys between 21 and 25 years old are allowed to marry while girls over 18 years are allowed to marry. Marriages are arranged by the elders through negotiation\(^{52}\). Monogamy is the norm. The thali and toe-rings are the marriage

\(^{47}\) Interview with Ganapathi, \textit{op.cit.}

\(^{48}\) Interview with Arunachalam, \textit{op.cit.}

\(^{49}\) Interview with Annamalai, M., \textit{Farmer}, Mohanur Village, 4 June 2005.


\(^{51}\) Interview Vijaya, M., \textit{SHG}, Mohanur Village, 10 July 2005.

\(^{52}\) \textit{Ibid.}
symbols for women. Divorce is permissible with social approval. Either spouse can initiate the divorce. Children are the liability of the father in the case of divorce. Remarriage between divorcees is permitted.

The pre-delivery ritual known as valaikappu is observed for pregnant women. It is conducted during the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy at the husband’s house. The pregnant woman is given a ceremonial bath, dressed and adorned with valaiyal (bangles) presented by her mother and elders for a safe and easy confinement. The first delivery takes place at her natal home with the help of a midwife. Sometimes delivery is arranged in a hospital. Post-delivery pollution is observed for sixteen days. On the 16th day, a ceremonial bath is given to both the mother and child. The christening ceremony is usually observed on the same day. They give the names of ancestors or deities to their children. The tonsuring ceremony is at the end of the child’s first year. Both male and female children are tonsured. Ear-boring is also done at the same time.

The Periyakkottai Panchayat Kallar have a traditional caste council. It has powers to excommunicate, impose cash fines or reprimand the culprits. Disputes over land and water, theft,

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53. Interview with Thirughanam, op.cit.
54. Interview with Annamalai, op.cit.
55. Ibid
57. Interview with Annamalai, op.cit.
58. Interview with Vijaya, M., op.cit.
59. Interview with Thavamani, M., op.cit.
adultery and inter caste marriage are the cases generally settled by the council. The Mukkulathor Association works for the general welfare of the community.\textsuperscript{60}

They worship different deities. These deities are also worshipped as family deities. Mariyamman and Murugan are some of their usual deities. They also worship Sangazhamman and Palaramman as village deities.\textsuperscript{61} They observe festivals like Pongal, Deepavali, Sivaratri\textsuperscript{62}, Adi and Karthigai\textsuperscript{63}. Sacred gurus are found in the community and they play a role in birth, marriage and death rites. However, some employ Brahmins as sacred priests to conduct marriage ceremonies.\textsuperscript{64} They have oral tradition and both men and women sing folk – songs during ceremonial and festive occasions. \textit{Kolattam} and \textit{Kummi} are folk – dances performed by both men and women.\textsuperscript{65} They accept water and cooked food from the higher castes like the Brahmin and Chettiar. They do not accept cooked food and water from lower caste people.\textsuperscript{66} They exchange water and cooked food with their kith and kin. They share wells and water sources with other communities in their locality. They visit the religious shrines and participate in traditional festivals and festivities in the area.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Interview with Rajendiran, S., \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{61} Interview with Mani Iyer, \textit{Farmer}, Mohanur Village, 28 July 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Suneel Babel, \textit{Mystic India}, Vol.5.No.11, Delhi, November 2004, p.8.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Interview with Murugan, \textit{Priest}, Vempanpatti Village, 24 June 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Interview with Mani Iyer, \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{65} \textit{Madras Musings}, Chennai, August 1-15, 2000, p.8.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Interview with Murugan, \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
The Periyakottai Panchayat Kallar usually bury their dead\textsuperscript{68}. The last rites are performed by the youngest son for the father and by the eldest son for the mother\textsuperscript{69}. When death occurs, the message is sent to all relatives by the local tradition and the dead body is given a bath and dressed in new clothes\textsuperscript{70} before the last departure. Then it is carried to the burial place. They observe \textit{karumathi}, on the 16\textsuperscript{th} day during which ritual they offer food to the departed soul. \textit{Punyadanam} (ceremonial purification) is performed to mark the end of pollution\textsuperscript{71}. They also observe 30\textsuperscript{th} day and annual death rites and ancestor worship.

(ii) \textbf{Agamudaiyar}

The Periyakottai Panchayat Agamudaiyar is a branch of Mukkulothor Community. They are otherwise known as Thevars and Servais. Thevars are also a martial group, distributed in the southern districts of Kanniyakumari, Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, Madurai, Tiruchirappalli and Pudukkottai. Mukkulathor is synonymous with Thevar. The Maravar, Agamudaiyar and Kallar communities collectively call themselves as Mukkulathor and use the title\textsuperscript{72}, Thevar. The meaning of Thevar is ‘leader’\textsuperscript{73}. They themselves claim Kshatriya status in the \textit{varna} order\textsuperscript{74}. At Mohanur

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Interview with Kanthasamy, \textit{Headmaster}, Panchayat Union Middle School, Mohanur Village, 1 September.2005.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Interview with Vellasamy, K., \textit{Farmer}, Mohanur Village,1.September 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{70} \textit{Ibid}
\item \textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{72} Interview with Rajendiran, S., \textit{op.cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{73} Alalasundaram, R., \textit{op.cit}, pp.132-134.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Singh, K.S., \textit{People of India Tamil Nadu}, Part. III, Madras, 2001, p.1458.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Sundararaj, T., \textit{Indian Historical Studies}, Vol. I, Tiruchirappalli, October 2004, p. 86.
\end{itemize}
village in the Periyakkottai Panchayt, the total number of Agamudaiyar consists of 67 male and 63 female, a total of 130 people. Tamil is the only popular language.

The Agamudaiyars, like kallars, are non-vegetarians. They eat flesh of sheep, and chicken but do not eat beef. Their staple food is rice. They also consume millets and ragi. They consume all varieties of locally available vegetables, pulses, roots and tubers. They use groundnut oil for cooking. The consumption of milk and milk products is moderate. They consume fruits occasionally. They drink tea and coffee. Some of the men drink sarayam and kallu (local liquor) and smoke beedis and cigarettes. Both men and women chew betel leaf, with or without tobacco. Some of the men inhale snuff.\footnote{Interview with Annamalai, M., \textit{Farmer}, Mohanur village on 04.06.2005.}

Agamudaiyars now educate their children. They use both modern and indigenous medicines. They are aware of family planning. They avail various government developmental programmes.\footnote{Interview with Marrimuthu, K., \textit{Farmer}, Mohanur village, 5 June, 2005.} They have access to all civic amenities.

The Agamudaiyar women have a secondary status compared to their men. They participate in socio-religious rituals. They usually attend to farm work. Some of them work as agricultural labourers and contribute to the family income. They have no role in decision-making. They do not have any control over the family expenditure.
The Agamudaiyars observe puberty rites for a girl when she attains the age. She is given a bath and secluded for eight days in a separate hut or in a corner of the verandah of her house. She may not touch even her family members during the pollution period. On the ninth day, she is given a ritual bath and wears new clothes which are usually presented to her by her maternal uncle. Then she is asked to enter the house. The family arranges a feast for relatives and neighbors on that occasion.

Marriages among the Agamudaiyars are arranged by parents through negotiation. Generally the marriage proposal is initiated by the boy's side. Agamudaiyar boys are married between 21 and 27 years and girls between 18 and 25. They prefer cross cousin marriages and uncle – niece marriages. In Agamudaiyar caste, usually boy's father's sister's daughter is preferred for marriage. In the event of his marriage to another girl, he has to get the consent of his father's sister and she has to declare in the presence of community elders that her relatives do not have any objection to the marriage.

Prior to the marriage, the bridegroom's family goes on a favorable day to the house of the girl, taking with them five or more coconuts, five bunches of plantains, five pieces of turmeric, betel, sweets, flowers, a pair of new clothes and the thali strung on a thread dyed with turmeric. The bride is seated on a plank, facing east. The bridegroom's sister removes the string of black beads from her neck.

77. Interview with Vijaya, M., SHG, Mohanur village, 6 August 2005.
78. Anuradha Sharma, op.cit, pp.268-269.
and ties the thali thereon. Then the bride is taken to the house of the bridegroom, where they sit side by side on a plank, and a ceremony to eliminate the evil eye is performed. The bridegroom’s parents arrange a non-vegetarian feast. The consummation ceremony is observed on the same day at the bridegroom’s residence\(^\text{81}\).

The valaikappu ritual among the Agamudaiyar is observed during the seventh or ninth month of a woman’s first pregnancy. The first delivery takes place in her natal home. After the birth of a child, the mother and child are kept in seclusion for 16 days. On the sixteenth day, they are given ritual bath\(^\text{82}\). They christen the child in the third or fifth month. They feed the child with food grains in the ninth month\(^\text{83}\). They celebrate tonsuring and ear-piercing ceremonies for all children when they attain the age of one or three. Widow remarriage is accepted and divorce is permitted. The children become the responsibility of the father after divorce. Divorce compensation is paid to the wife by the husband if he opts for divorce.

At present the Agamudaiyars are mainly dependent on agriculture and they also make their living as agricultural labour.\(^\text{84}\) Land is the main economic resource for them. Most of them own land and they grow various wet and dry crops\(^\text{85}\). Some of them take

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83. Interview with Thavamani, M., SHG, Mohanur village, 5 August 2005.
to agricultural labour and others do business. Payments are made either in cash or in kind.

In the Periyakottai Panchayat, cordial relation exists in the family between son in law and mother in law, and between grandparents and grand children. All the sons in a family get equal shares in parental property. Succession is being claimed by the eldest son and daughters do not claim a share in the parental property.

Agamudaiyar observe the convention of either burying or cremating their dead. The eldest son has the responsibility to conduct the last rites of the dead. The news of the death is communicated to the relatives by the vetti or kavalan who belong to the Parayan community. After their arrival, the body is bathed in water brought from a nearby well. Then the body is wrapped in a new white cloth, and kept on a bier. The chief mourner (the eldest son of the deceased) performs kolli (last funeral rites), which involves breaking the pot containing water at the burial ground. Then they bury or cremate the body. On the third day after death, family members of the deceased and some close relatives visit the cremation ground and offer milk and food items to the soul of the deceased. On the sixth day, a pandal (booth) of Naval (Eugemia jambolana) leaves is prepared, and the chief mourner puts on a turban to signify that he is the next head of the family. They observe the Karumathi or karumanthiram (ritual of 16th day) ceremony on the sixteenth day after death. The sons take a ritual

86. Interview with Annamalai, M., *op cit*.
bath in a nearby tank or river. On returning home after the ceremony, each male member of the family of the deceased has to dip his toe into a mortar full of cow dung water, and the last man has to knock it down.

Agamudaiyars are Hindus. They celebrate Hindu festivals such as Deepavali, Vinayaka Chaturthi, Karthigai, Adi, Pongal, and Tamil New Year's Day. They primarily worship their family deities.

Agamudaiyars avail the services of the washer man, barber and parayan. They accept water and cooked food from communities of equal or higher rank. They share drinking water sources with other communities. They participate in socio-religious festivals along with other communities. They have landowner-tenant, patron-client and cultivator-labourer relationships with other communities. They are active in politics and local political leadership revolves around them.

**Mercantile Caste-Chettiar**

The Periyakkottai Panchayat Chettiar is Velan Chettiar. Etymologically, the name Velan is derived from velanmai, meaning 'agriculture' and Chetti is the title used by businessmen. The Velan Chettiar traditionally involve themselves in agriculture-related business and most of them are still in it. They mostly live in nuclear families but live in joint families also. The father is the

89. Interview with Annamalai, M., *op. cit.*
91. Interview with Annathurai, S., *op.cit.*
head of the family. They maintain healthy relationship between sister in law and brother in law. Inheritance and succession is in the male line. All sons get equal shares\textsuperscript{95} of the family property.

Their women do not inherit property except rarely in certain specific cases such as a mother inheriting some property when there is no male issue in the family. They are largely home bound. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in tailoring and embroidery as a means of supplementing the family income. However, they do have a role in family management and in meeting family expenditure. In Mohanur village, their population at present is 6 male and 6 female, a total of 12 members. They speak Tamil and write in the Tamil script\textsuperscript{96}.

They are meat eaters but do not eat beef or pork. Their staple food is rice and eat all pulses and vegetables. The men take alcoholic drinks occasionally. They consume milk and milk products. Both men and women chew betel leaves and areca nuts. Men have smoking habits\textsuperscript{97}.

On attaining puberty, a Velan Chettiar girl is secluded for eleven days in a palm leaf shed erected in the backyard of her house. The shed is built by her maternal uncle. Relatives bring sweets and full meals for the girl. On the eleventh day, women ritually bathe the girl after which she wears the new clothes brought by her maternal uncle. On this occasion, a Brahmin is called to conduct a household ritual. The palm leaf shed used for the ritual is

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{96} Front line, Chennai, July 2005, p.70. \\
\textsuperscript{97} Interview with Maruthamuthu, Farmer, Mohanur Village, 6 July 2005.
brought down and taken outside the village to be burnt as soon as the ceremony is over. But puberty rituals are now being simplified to a large extent\textsuperscript{98}.

The betrothal ceremony is a formal function arranged in the bride's house after the bride and bridegroom's horoscopes are found to match\textsuperscript{99}. On this occasion, the two families exchange gifts. The betrothal ceremony would be held a day before the marriage. In the Periyakkottai Panchayat, Velan Chettiar do not perform marriages in the Tamil months of adi or margazhi or on Saturdays, Tuesdays or on ashtami, navami and amavasai days.

The important rituals of the wedding take place in the early hours of the day at the bride’s residence. Prior to the wedding day, the manappandal (wedding dais) is erected in the presence of a Brahmin who generally presides over the marriage\textsuperscript{100}. The navithar (barber) brings new pots from the kusavan (potter) and they are filled with navadhaniyam (nine cereals). Rice is cooked in a new pot and is kept on three plantain leaves. Jaggery is strewn on the rice. Before the muhurtham, turmeric - stained thread is tied around the bridegroom’s wrist. Then he worships at a nearby temple. At the auspicious time, the bridegroom ties the knot or thali around the bride’s neck amidst sakhala vadya (ceremonial music). Then the couple exchange garlands three times and do padapuja, touching the feet of their parents and elders next.


\textsuperscript{100} Interview with Subramaniyan, M, \textit{Tea Master}, Mohanur Village , 5 July 2005.
father of the bride does *kanyadhan* by symbolically handing over his daughter to the bridegroom. The couple circumambulate a grinding stone, after which the bride’s feet are placed on the stone and the couple are shown the *arundhati* star. The same night, the new bride, wearing a yellow sari, boils milk in her kitchen. The ritual is usually consummated on the wedding night. In the past, the consummation ceremony was an elaborate one held for some days, or months, after the wedding\textsuperscript{101}.

In the fifth month of a woman’s first pregnancy, presents are sent to her by her family members and a small function is organized. In the seventh or ninth month, a *Valakappu* or bangles wearing ceremony is conducted. On that occasion, relatives from the mother’s side bring seven or nine (according to the month) types of food preparations (*kattu sadham*), such as curd and tamarind rice. The function is a restricted one. After delivery, the mother is not bathed till the seventh day. On the seventh day, a small function is organized and on the advice of the astrologer, the child is placed in the cradle at an auspicious time\textsuperscript{102}. Either in the first or third month, the child is christened. Tonsures are done according to convenience in an odd month, preferably within one year\textsuperscript{103}.

Their traditional occupation is agrarian related business. They mainly market paddy, sugar cane, tapioca and tobacco. They lend money to agriculturists on condition that the farm output should be sold to them alone. Some Velan Chettiars are farm

\textsuperscript{101} Interview with Manikkam, *Grocery Shop Owener*, Mohanur village, 7 June 2005.

\textsuperscript{102} Narayana Reddi, G., *op.cit*, p.19.

\textsuperscript{103} Interview with Chinnaponnu, M., *House Wife*, Mohanur Village, 7 June 2005.
labourers. Only a few among them own land. Of late, many have taken to non-agricultural business activities and some have even small scale industries. Some are in white collar profession.

There is no caste council among the Velan Chettiars. A few community elders act as adjudicators in disputes. From the early fifties, the Velan Chettiars started forming modern caste associations for the improvement of the community as well as to provide a voice for the community in its representations to the Government. Their association, particularly the Agaram Velan Chettiar Sangham provides books, clothes and monetary assistance to needy children in the community and offer scholarships for education.

The Velan Chettiars are predominantly Hindus by faith. Agaram Chandrai Perumal is their caste deity and their temple is located in Agaram village. Every family, however far away it lives, visits the temple at least once, during the main festival. Every family has a family deity, a goddess who is worshipped on every important occasion and during life cycle rituals. Their favourite deities are Pudavaikkari, Ankala Parameswari, Munjanur Govinda, Venkatachalapati, Parameswari, Perumal and Murugan. They celebrate Thai Pongal, Vaikasi and car festivals for Siva and Perumal. Their main sacred centres are Tirupati, Palani and Sabarimalai. The Brahmin and Pandaram priests are their sacred specialists who officiate at their life cycle rituals.

Agaram Velan Chettiars have communal relations with the Vellalar and other Chettiar sub-groups. The Brahmin takes uncooked

food items from them. Patron – client relations have disappeared to a great extent, but the indispensable services of other communities are sought on payment whenever needed. The Agaram Velan Chettiar prefers modern medicare but indigenous medicines are not shunned. A few of their women get sterilized. All modern facilities are available to them\textsuperscript{105}.

Most Periyakkottai Panchayat Velan Chettiars bury their dead. When a person dies, the \textit{Navithan} is called to straighten the body. Then the corpse is bathed, perfumed and draped with new clothes, and its feet and hands are tied\textsuperscript{106}. The bier is taken to the burial ground to the accompaniment of drums being beaten by the Parayan and \textit{sangu} (conch shell) blown by the Dasari. The eldest or youngest son does the funeral rites. On the \textit{eemakriya} day (funeral day), the ashes are collected (in case of cremation) and immersed in a river at a later time. On the eleventh day, the bangles of the widowed women are removed by three \textit{sumangalis} (women whose husbands are alive). On the ninth or eleventh day, prayers and \textit{shradha} are offered to the deceased at the burial or cremation ground. Thereafter, a feast is served at home\textsuperscript{107}. The expenses for the meal are borne by the married daughters of the house who cook and serve the food. Death anniversaries are observed annually. For three months after a death, the family members do not observe any auspicious occasion or attend any function outside home or visit temples\textsuperscript{108}.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{106} Interview with Manikkam, \textit{op.cit.}
\bibitem{107} Chitre, V.S., \textit{op.cit.}
\bibitem{108} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{thebibliography}
Idaiyar

The Idaiyars\(^\text{109}\) are a community of shepherds. It is recorded in the Thanjavur Manual that "the Ideir are so called from idei (middle)". They occupied a kind of intermediate link between farmers and merchants. According to Thurston, "perhaps they are so called from originally inhabiting the lands which lay midway between the hills and the arable lands, the jungly or pastoral plains suited for pasturage (i.e., the middle land out of the five groups of land mentioned in Tamil works, viz. Kurinji, Palai, Mullai, Marutam, Neytal)". The community has different synonyms, such as Yadava etc. The Idaiyars are so called from their custom of wearing sixteen glass beads on either side of the thali. A large number of Idayars are called Pillai. In the southern districts, they are called Konars. They are distributed in almost all the districts of Tamil Nadu. Their titles are Konar, Nambiyyar and Nainar. In the Periyakkottai Panchayat area, they live in villages like Periyakkottai, Mohanur and Kothakappatti. The total number of Idaiyar population at present is 107 male and 96 female, a total of 203. The mother tongue of the Idaiyar is Tamil.

Idaiyars are nonvegetarians, but do not eat beef or pork. Their staple food is rice. They also consume ragi and millets. They consume all varieties of pulses, vegetables and fruits. They use groundnut oil and gingelly oil for cooking. Being shepherds, they consume milk and milk products moderately. They drink tea and coffee. A few men consume alcoholic drinks, such as sarayam and kallu. Both men and women chew betel leaves, with or without tobacco. A few of them inhale snuff.

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Idaiyars observe endogamy at the community level and exogamy at the gotra or lineage level. The exogamous lineages or gotras govern their matrimonial alliances. Mother’s brother’s daughter, father’s sister’s daughter and uncle – niece marriages are preferred.\(^{110}\).

Idaiyar women have a secondary status compared to their men. They participate in all social and religious activities. They mainly perform household work and market the milk and milk products. They also participate in agricultural operations and contribute to the family income. They do not have any decision making powers\(^{111}\).

The Idaiyars observe puberty rites (\textit{manjal neerattu} or \textit{poopu neerattu}). The girl is kept in seclusion for sixteen days in a hut built with green coconut leaves. On the sixteenth day, after a purificatory bath, the girl receives gifts from relatives. A vegetarian feast would be served as soon as the ceremony was over. The maternal uncle of the girl bears all the expenses of the function. He also presents her a lamp, a pair of new clothes and gold ornaments\(^{112}\).

Idaiyar girls get married normally at 17 – 22 years and boys at 20 -25. Matrimonial alliances are negotiated by their elders. If the girl’s and boy’s horoscopes match each other, the \textit{nichayathartham} would be held. Monogamy is the marital norm. Polygamy is permitted if the first wife is barren. The \textit{thali} is the symbol of

\(^{110}\) Interview with Lakshmi, V., \textit{SHG.}, Mohanur village, 6 July 2005.
\(^{111}\) Interview with Santhi, K., \textit{SHG.}, Mohanur village, 6 July 2005.
\(^{112}\) \textit{Ibid}
marriage\textsuperscript{113}. Paying bride price in cash has been replaced by dowry in kind. Divorce is permitted. Either spouse can initiate divorce. Divorce compensation is decided by the traditional panchayat or a judicial court. After divorce, children stay with their father. Remarriage is permitted only for male divorcees.

In the past, Idaiyar weddings were celebrated over seven days. This was subsequently reduced to five days and then three days. But now the entire ceremony lasts only one day. Most weddings now take place in \textit{kalyana mandapam}. In a typical instance, the proceedings start with the betrothal during which the bridegroom's father goes to the girl's house with gifts of new clothes, fruits and ornaments. The bride price is paid and betel leaves are exchanged. The bridegroom goes to the girl's cousins (maternal uncle's sons) who have a right to marry her and presents them with 25 paise and betel leaves. Their acceptance of this means their consent to the marriage.

The rituals of the wedding are the same as in other Hindu weddings except for a few customs\textsuperscript{114}. For instance, the bride is carried in the arms of one of her maternal uncles to the \textit{pandal}, while another uncle carries a lighted torch placed in a mortar. This light is kept in front of them throughout the wedding. After the wedding, when it is time for the couple to go to the bridegroom's house, the right hand of the bridegroom is placed on the bride's left hand, and they are tied together by one of the bride's maternal


uncle’s sons. The bride is then carried into the house in the arms of an elder brother of the bridegroom. At the threshold she is stopped by her maternal uncle’s sons, who play act a mock fight with the man who is carrying her. The bridegroom pays them each 25 paise, and he and the bride are allowed to enter the house. On the seven day after the wedding, the ends of the clothes of the newly weds are tied together, and they bathe in turmeric water. The wrist – threads are removed and they oil each other’s heads, and bathe in a tank. The bride serves food to the bridegroom and later she eats food from the same leaf, to indicate the union between them. The bride also decorates a small grinding stone with a cloth and ornaments and takes it to all relatives who are present to bless her in order that she may have many children.

Idaiyars observe the pre – delivery ritual, seemantham, in the seventh month of a woman’s first pregnancy. After this, the pregnant woman is taken to her natal home for her delivery. Again in the ninth month of pregnancy, the valaikappu function is observed in her natal house. The delivery is attended by either a local thai or maruttuvacchi or by a Primary Health Worker. A few women go to hospitals or private nursing homes. They observe birth pollution for 9 – 16 days. On the 9th or 16th day after birth, they put the child in the cradle and also christen it. The child is tonsured in its third or fifth year at their local temple or at Tirupati.

115. Chitre, V.S., op.cit, p.313.
116. Interview with Vellasamy, Farmer, Mohanur village, 6 July 2005
The child's ears are then pierced. Close relatives present new clothes or money or gold ornaments to the child\textsuperscript{118}.

Both nuclear\textsuperscript{119} and mixed extended types of families are found among the Idaiyars. A cordial relationship is being permitted between brothers in law, sisters in law and grandparents and grandchildren. Avoidance of relations also exists between son in law and mother in law. All male children have equal rights to their ancestral property\textsuperscript{120}. The daughters do not get any share unless there are no sons\textsuperscript{121}. The eldest son succeeds as the head of the family after his father's death\textsuperscript{122}.

The traditional occupation of the Idaiyar is sheep and cattle rearing and selling milk and milk products\textsuperscript{123}. Some of them have cultivable land and engage in agriculture\textsuperscript{124}. Some have petty businesses. A few work as employees in government and private institutions. In rural areas, some work as tenant cultivators and contract labourers\textsuperscript{125}. Their children help in tending their cattle and sheep and in agricultural work\textsuperscript{126}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item 118. Santhi, K., \textit{op.cit.}
  \item 120. Pauline Kolenda, \textit{op.cit}, pp.33-35.
  \item 126. Vellaisamy,P., \textit{op.cit}.
\end{itemize}
Idaiyars are Hindus and Lord Krishna is their deity. They worship family and village deities also. They celebrate Deepavali, Ayudha Puja, Tamil and Telugu New Year’s Days, Dussehra and all other Hindu festivals. Idaiyars accept both cooked and uncooked food items from other communities who are equal and superior to them. All other communities, except the Brahmin, accept both cooked and uncooked food items from them. They attend and participate in all the religious, ceremonial and other occasions along with other communities. They share water sources and cremation or burial grounds with other communities of equal status. They visit the religious shrines of other Hindus. They maintain patron – client, landlord – tenant and cultivator – labour relationships with other communities.

Idaiyars now give importance to education but there are many drop outs from studies due to poverty. They use modern medicine. They are aware of the family planning programme but most couples prefer to have three children. They have access to all civic amenities.

On the death of a married Idaiyar man, the body is placed in a seated posture. A measure of rice, a lighted lamp and a coconut are placed near it, and burning firewood is laid at the door of the house. When relatives and friends arrive, the body is removed from the house and is kept in a pandal. The male relatives put on the

sacred thread and each brings a pot of water from a nearby well or tank. The widow applies oil on the head of the corpse. On the way to the burial ground, a barber carries a firebrand and a pot, and a washerman carries the mat, clothes and the articles used by the deceased¹³⁰. When they reach the Idukadu (graveyard), a mark representing the shrine of the legendary king Harischandra, who is said to be in charge of the burial ground, is placed on the ground¹³¹. A Parayan makes a cross mark at the four corners of the bier, and the son, who is the chief mourner, places a small coin on three of the marks, leaving out the one at the northeast corner. The Parayan takes these coins and tears a bit of cloth from the winding sheet which is sent to the widow. At the burial ground, the relatives place a few grains of rice, water and coins in the mouth of the deceased. The coins are taken by the Parayan. The chief mourner goes around the corpse three times, carrying a water pot, and at the end of each round, the barber makes a hole in the pot with his conch shell. After the pyre has been lit, the chief mourner goes away without looking back. The widow, meanwhile, breaks her thali string and throws it into a vessel of milk, which is set on the spot where the deceased breathed his last.

The son on his return home, after bathing, steps across a pestle placed at the threshold. Arathi is performed and he worships a lighted lamp within the house. They observe sixteen days of death pollution. On the next day, milk, ghee, curd, tender coconuts, nine kinds of grain, water and other articles required for worship are taken to the burial ground. The shoulder bone ashes are collected

¹³⁰ Sinha, B.B., *Society in Tribal India*, BR, Delhi, 1982, pp.3-5.
¹³¹ Chitre, V.S., *op.cit.*
and placed on a leaf. A miniature plough is made and nine kinds of
grain are sown. On the chief mourner’s return home, a turban is
placed on his head by his maternal uncles. A new cloth is folded
and on it a betel leaf is placed and worshipped for sixteen days.

On the 16th day, a Brahmin makes a human figure with rice
and darba (holy grass), which has to be worshipped by the chief
mourner not less than twenty-five times, and he must bathe between
each worship. The bones are then carried in a new earthen pot and
immersed in a stream. At night, some of the cooked food and a pair
of new clothes are offered to the deceased. Usually the food is
cooked in front of the main door. They worship their deceased
ancestors every year at the time of Pongal132.

Cultivating Caste- Valaiyar

Valaiyars are distributed in the Periyakkottai Panchayat in
Pudukkottai district. Their original home is said to be Piranmalai in
Ramnad district133. Thurston speaks of the Valaiyar as a socially and
economically backward group chiefly engaged in farm labour,
collection of fire wood, wild products, farming and hunting.134 They
derive their community name from the word valai, meaning ‘net’135. The
Valaiyar is an agricultural community. Their surname is Servai.
Valaiyars using the surname Moopanars are distributed in the southern
districts. Ambalakarar is a term used by at least two different
communities, viz, Kallar and Valaiyar, and generally denotes the

132. Interview with Pothari, Farmer, Mohanur Village, 7 June 2005.
133. Fuller, C.J., Caste Today, Oxford University, New Delhi, 1996, p.65.
134. Desingu Setty, The Valayar of South India: Society and Religion, New
135. Sing, K.S., op.cit, Part. III, p.1535.
headman. It is derived from the word ambalam, meaning 'the place where the caste panchayat meetings are conducted'. Valaiyars, who use the surname Mooppanar, meaning 'the oldest people', are different from the Valaiyars who are fisher folk. In Tamil, valai has two meanings: one is 'rat hole' and the other 'net'. The former pertains to the name Valaiyar used by the agriculturists. Their myth too supports this view. They associate themselves with the Kannappanayananar, a Saiva saint who was a vedar or hunter. Further they believe that Alagar, otherwise called Kallalagar of Madurai, is from Valaiyar caste and he was a hunter. According to them, the things which the god has on himself when taken out in a procession during festival occasions, viz. kusa valai (a golden net with a mouse) and valadadi kambu (a stick used while hunting rats and hares and to dig the earth), are associated with their caste occupation. In the social hierarchy, they are middle ranked and in the varna order they are Sudras. In the past, their womenfolk enlarged their earlobes and wore ornaments like tandatti, and mudichu. This custom has now disappeared and their women have started wearing only kammal (ear-studs). In the Periyakottai Panchayat, there are 172 Valaiyar male and 180 female, a total of 352 persons. Their mother tongue is Tamil. They do not have any identity mark of their own and they are classified in the middle order of the social hierarchy of the communities of the region. Being a fishing community, they inhabit the coastal region.

Valaiyars are non-vegetarians who eat pork. Rice and millets are their staple food. They eat all locally available vegetables. Either groundnut oil or gingelly oil is used for cooking. Men consume alcoholic drinks occasionally. Chewing betel leaf with or

without tobacco is common among them. A few of them use snuff\textsuperscript{137}. Valaiyar women support the family economically. They help their men in all kinds of agricultural activities except ploughing. They work as agricultural or other kinds of labourers. They take care of animals (cattle or sheep) and poultry and fetch potable water. They participate in social and religious activities but they cannot become members of their caste panchayat. Though women are consulted in every family activity, decision – making powers rest with men.

Valaiyars are also Moopanars and they are agriculturists. They also work as agricultural or other kinds of labour\textsuperscript{138}. The educated among them are in white-collar jobs. Land is owned by them individually. Child labour, especially in agricultural operations, exists\textsuperscript{139}. They have their own caste panchayat headed by a headman called ambalakarar. His office is hereditary. He controls the community and settles disputes. He also officiates at ceremonies. Valaiyars (Moopanars) have their caste association named ‘Kannappar Kula Valaiyar Munnetra Sangam’ and its headquarters is in Madurai.

On attaining puberty, a girl is bathed and isolated in a corner of the house. Pollution is observed for 30 days. The puberty ceremony (sadangu) is arranged on the 30\textsuperscript{th} day. Her maternal uncle gifts her a sari. A feast is arranged by the girl’s father, and relatives and friends present gifts to the girl\textsuperscript{140}.

\textsuperscript{137} Interview with Ananthan, Mohanur Village, 26 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{139} Desika Char, S.V., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.55-60.
\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Chelammal, V., SHG, Kothappati Village, 26 July 2005.
Valaiyar marriage alliances are arranged by the boy’s parents approaching the bride’s parents as per convention. The betrothal ceremony is held in the girl’s house. The boy’s parents purchase the betrothal sari and give 11 measures of rice, 11 coconuts, and betel leaf and areca nuts. The marriage fee of Rs. 25.25 has to be paid to their mahamai (caste panchayat). The headman officiates at the function. Marriages are arranged in the bride’s house and are conducted in the manavarai (marriage booth) erected in the middle of the marriage pandal. The thali is handed over by the headman to the bridegroom and the thali – tying is the major wedding rite. After the thali – tying, the couple exchange garlands. The consummation ceremony takes place in the bride’s house 141.

Marriages are arranged by parents through negotiation. Generally, Valaiyar boys get married at the age of 23 – 27 years and girls between 18 and 21. The thali is the marriage symbol. The mother’s brother’s and father’s sister’s daughters are preferred spouses. Marrying the sister’s daughter is prohibited. They follow the patrilocal form of residence and they constitute a matrilineal society. Divorce and widow remarriages are allowed, but are now on the decrease 142. Divorce is decided by the headman of the caste panchayat. If the husband asks for the divorce, he has to pay Rs, 5001 to his wife as compensation. But the wife need not pay such compensation even if she initiates the divorce. In case of divorce, male children live with their mother. Reunion of the divorced couple is also possible and a small marriage function is conducted by the headman in such cases. A widower can marry his wife’s younger sister while

the widow can marry her husband’s brother. Neither dowry nor bride-price is demanded or paid and monogamy is the norm\(^{143}\).

For her first delivery, the pregnant Valaiyar woman is invited by her parents during the seventh or ninth month. The pre-delivery ritual, \textit{valaikaapu} or \textit{seemantham} is observed\(^{144}\). Birth pollution is observed for 30 days. The mother and child return to their house after three months. On this day, the father of the child arranges for a non-vegetarian feast. The tonsuring ceremony is arranged in the family deity’s temple before the child is one year old. The ear-piercing ceremony, called \textit{kadhani vizha}, is celebrated in a grand manner. The maternal uncle of the child gifts the ear studs\(^{145}\).

Brothers in law and sisters in law have relations. Property is divided among the children after the death of their parents. Both nuclear and joint families are found among them\(^{146}\). In the case of the premature death of the father, the eldest son acts as the head of the family.

Valaiyar women are consulted in family decisions. They support their family economically by selling fish and assisting their men folk in repairing fishing nets. Women take part in religious and social activities. But they cannot control the family expenditure and they are not permitted to be members of the caste panchayat or caste association\(^{147}\).

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The Valaiyars cremate the deceased if the person is a firstborn. Others are buried. A barber blows the conch shell in the death procession and a Chakkiliyar beats the drum. They themselves make the bier. The eldest son of the deceased performs the kolli (fire rite to cremate the body). If the deceased has no male issue, eldest daughter performs the kolli in front of the house before the body is carried to the burial ground. A son performs the same in the burial ground. Only the son who performs the death rite shaves his head at the burial ground. In case of burial, they themselves dig the grave, but cremation is done by the Chakkiliyar who is paid for this. On the next day, they observe paluttal (offering of milk) ceremony. The chief mourners take oil baths either on the third or seventh day and on this day the sons and daughters of the deceased receive new clothes from their relatives. The widow gets new clothes from her brother or parents and also from her father in law and brothers in law. Kirigai (death rite) is observed on the 9th, 11th or 16th day. The widow removes her thali on this day. If the widow wants to remarry, she can remarry148. Such marriages are conducted in a simple manner and officiated by the headman. Widows wear the colored saris but abstain from adorning their hair with flowers or wearing vermilion on their foreheads. All death rituals are performed in the presence of their headman149.

Valaiyars have their own caste panchayat. Their headman is called ambalam. He is assisted by the thandal (messenger). Both the offices are hereditary. Valaiyars are Hindus and worship the Hindu pantheon as well as family and regional deities. Pongal,

148. Fuller, C.J., op.cit, pp. 70-72.
Deepavali and Karthigai are their major festivals. The Sangalamman festival is observed in the Tamil month of Avani (August – September).

Valaiyars have cordial relations with other castes. They accept food and water from all other communities of the region except the Parayar. The Parayars are the drummers at their marriages, festivals and ceremonial occasions. Valaiyars now educate their children. But due to their poor economic condition, they cannot educate their children beyond higher secondary school. Both modern and traditional medicines are used by them and modern family planning programmes are accepted by them. They have access to all civic amenities.

**Artisan Castes- Kammalar**

Kammalars are usually referred to as *Achari* and they use *Achari* as a title. Vishwakarma is the most common synonym for this community. They live in different parts of Pudukkottai district. At Mohanur and Kothakappatti Villages in the Periyakkottai Panchayat, the total number of Kammalar population is 19 male and 19 female, a total of 38 persons.

Kammalars are non-vegetarians, but do not eat pork or beef. Their diet is similar to that of their Hindu counterparts. Cross cousin marriage is the preferred type of marriage among the Kammalars and uncle – niece marriage is allowed. Though they prefer spouses from their own group, there is no bar against marrying into another sub-group of the community. The boys and girls are being married after 21 and 18 years of age respectively.

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Marriages are arranged by middlemen of close relatives. Monogamy is strictly adhered to. Sororate is permitted but not levirate. The thali is the symbol of marriage for women and the marriage ring has no sacred value\textsuperscript{152}. Bride – price is not paid but dowry is usually paid in the form of gold\textsuperscript{153}. Divorce is not permitted, but informal separation is tolerated in cases of extreme incompatibility of spouses\textsuperscript{154}. Remarriage of widows is permitted but takes place rarely.

Kammalar families are nuclear\textsuperscript{155}, with the extended family splitting within one or two years after the marriage of a son or after he has a child. Inheritance rules and familial relationships are similar to those of their Hindu counterparts. The status of the Kammalar women, too, is a secondary one, similar to that of their Hindu sisters.

Kammalars too, observe pre – delivery rituals, such as valaikappu and also observe birth pollution. The infant is named on the eighth day after birth\textsuperscript{156}. The child is tonsured within a year. Puberty pollution and rituals are observed in the case of adolescent girls\textsuperscript{157}. Most of the Kammalars are goldsmiths, carpenters or stone masons in the Periyakottai Panchayat. Other occupational Kammalar groups are less. Most of them follow their traditional occupations.

\textsuperscript{152} Sheela, J., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.202-204.
\textsuperscript{154} Interview with Amsu, P., \textit{SHG.}, Mohanur Village, 6 July 2005.
\textsuperscript{155} ABIL&Coll, \textit{op.cit}, p.417.
\textsuperscript{156} Narayana Reddi, G., \textit{op.cit}, p.516.
\textsuperscript{157} Interview with Vijaya, R. \textit{SHG.}, Mohanur, 07. 06. 2005.
A few of them own some agricultural land cultivated by hired labour or given on short tenure to peasant – cultivators\textsuperscript{158}.

Kammalars are a traditional artisan community with a well-integrated organization of sub-castes belonging to different occupations and with distinct internal status. Kammalars perceive their social position to be in the higher ranks of the local and regional caste hierarchy\textsuperscript{159}. They are said to have commercial links with castes such as the Nadars.

The claims of intermarriage between the Kammalars of Tamil Nadu cannot be accepted at its face value. The modern intercommunity linkages permit the Kammalars to take food and water from other communities. But at a practical level, this too is difficult as they avoid beef and pork.\textsuperscript{160} The literacy rate is quite high among the Kammalars. But girls study only up to the primary school level.

**Functional Caste- Vannar**

The washermen community in Tamil society is called Vannars. The name Vannar is derived from the Tamil word *vannam*, meaning ‘beauty’.\textsuperscript{161} Vannar also refers to a tradition that they are descendants of the mythological hero, Virabhadra, who was ordered by Siva to wash the clothes of all human beings to expiate the sin of

\textsuperscript{158} Anil Rajimwale, Krishna Jha Bobby, Poulse, *Oral History Documentation of Indian Labour Movement*, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, New Delhi, 2003, p.1.


\textsuperscript{160} Interview with Rajenthiran, M., *Carpenter*, Mohanur Village, 6 July 2005.

putting many people to death in daksha’s Yaga. Vannars who render service to the Parayans are called Puratha Vannars or Puthirai Vannars and they are deemed to be Scheduled Castes. Those Vannars who serve Muslims are called Tulukka Vannars. It is recorded that Vannar is an occupational term rather than a caste title.

Vannars of Tamil Society claim to be among the original inhabitants of the State\textsuperscript{162}. They are distributed all over the State. The Sattanathan Report (1974) records that according to the 1921 Census, their population was 2,49,502. They speak Tamil and use the Tamil script\textsuperscript{163}. In Periyakkottai Panchayat, Vannar population is 28 male and 19 Female, a total of 47 persons.

Rice, millets and ragi are the staple cereals of the Vannar’s diet. They eat all the locally available pulses, vegetables, tubers, roots and fruits. They use groundnut, pulses, vegetables, tubers, roots and fruits. They use groundnut oil and gingelly oil for cooking. They are non-vegetarians but do not eat beef or pork. There are hardly one or two houses of the Vannars in the rural areas. One person from each family goes to the houses in the village to which they extend their services, both in the morning and in the evening and their patrons, in turn, put a handful of cooked food in their vessels. The food collected thus is eaten by members of their families. They cook only their night meal, supplementing the food collected in the evenings\textsuperscript{164}. They consume milk and milk products.

\textsuperscript{162} Mandelbaum David, \textit{Society in India}, Vol.1, University of California, Benkeley, 1972, pp.15-20.
\textsuperscript{163} \textit{Front Line}, Kasturi & Sons Ltd, Chennai, July 1, 2005, p.70.
Men smoke beedis, cigarettes and, at times, indigenous cheroots. Men and women chew betel, areca nuts and lime with tobacco. Some of them use snuff also. Women do not consume liquor but men do occasionally.

Vannars do not have separate identity of their own but they form social groups among themselves, besides the identity of the communities they serve. But nowadays in towns and cities, they are not selective about their patrons and hence the differences on the basis of the social rank of their patrons are gradually vanishing. But in Periyakkottai Panchayat areas, they maintain these differences. Vannars serve the ‘clean’ communities.

The puberty ritual among the Vannars is known as manjal neerattu vizha. When a Vannar girl attains puberty, her maternal uncle makes an enclosure in the house with plaited green coconut leaves. Then married women apply oil and turmeric paste on the girl’s body and bathe her with water in which turmeric paste is mixed. After this bath, she is dressed in her finery and made to sit in the enclosure. Pollution is observed for five days. Every morning she is given gingelly oil mixed with a beaten egg to drink. During the day, the girl is given special food items, such as puttu (steamed rice flour, mixed with coconut and jaggery or sugar) besides her normal diet. On the sixth day, the plaited coconut leaves are burnt outside the house and the girl is bathed in turmeric – mixed water. She then crosses the burnt coconut leaves and enters the house, thus

165. Interview with Samikkannu, M., Washerman, Mohanur Village, 26 July 2005.
166. Sinha, B.B., op.cit, pp.2-4.
rid of pollution. The nalungu is then done by the married women assembled for the occasion.\(^{167}\)

Among the Vannars, the bridegroom's family takes the initiative in negotiating the marriage proposal. Once there is a mutual agreement between the boy's and girl's families, Vannars celebrate nichayathartham (betrothal) in the girl's house. On that occasion, the bridegroom's party has to give parriyam, the bride price agreed upon earlier, to the girl's parents and also a sari, a blouse and gold earrings for the girl. There is an exchange of betel nut, leaves and fruits between the boy's father and girl's father and then the girl's family serves a feast for all those present on that occasion.

On the evening prior to the wedding, the bride's party reaches the temple of the boy's village. There the bridegroom's party receives them and offers them panakaram (water in which cardamom, dry ginger powder and jaggery are mixed) and buttermilk. The girl's party is then escorted to the boy's house or the place of marriage to the accompaniment of music (melam) and a nalungu ritual would be held. Wedding rituals, presided over by a Brahmin priest, include the tying of kanganam on the couple's wrists, the kanyadanam, and the tying of the thali. After the wedding, the couple go to a nearby well or field where they sow some sprouts and pour a little water on them. Then the kanganam are untied. A feast is served to all invitees to the wedding by the bridegroom's family. On the same evening, the newly married

\(^{167}\) Interview with Sarosha, G., Washer Woman, Mohanur Village, 26 May, 2005.
couple leave for the bride’s house where the consummation ceremony takes place\(^{168}\).

Vannars maintain endogamy at the community level. They permit a man to marry his sister’s daughter or his father’s sister’s daughter or his mother’s brother’s daughter. *Sororate* is allowed, but it occurs very rarely. The marriage age for boys and girls are 18 and 20 respectively. Their marriages are settled through negotiation with horoscope and the initiative is normally taken by the boy’s family. They are generally monogamous but there are rare cases of polygamy. The *thali* and toe-rings are the symbols of marriage. Divorce is allowed on grounds of adultery\(^ {169}\). Widowers can remarry, but they do not encourage the remarriage of a female divorcee\(^ {170}\).

Pre – delivery rituals, such as *valaikappu* and *seemantham*, are celebrated by the Vannars. During the ninth month, they choose an auspicious day in consultation with the village Brahmin priest, to celebrate the ritual in the bridegroom’s residence. The bride’s parents give their daughter a sari, blouse, glass bangles, sweets and flowers etc\(^ {171}\).

The delivery usually takes place in the maternal grandmother’s house. Birth pollution is observed for eight days and on the ninth day, the child and the mother are given purificatory baths which mark the end of pollution. On that day itself, an elder member of the family christens the child. The child’s maternal

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grandparents usually give silver anklets, chain, edibles etc to the child on that occasion. When the child attains three or five years of age, they prick its ears. The child’s maternal grandparents give the child new clothes and a pair of thin gold wires to prick the ears in a grand function.

At Mohanur village in Periyakkottai Panchayat, only eight families of the Vannar community live. They live in either nuclear or vertically extended families. They do not observe any special avoidance or joking relationships among themselves. Whatever property is owned by the parents, it is inherited by the sons and if the father holds any office, the eldest son succeeds to it. They have their own houses almost on the periphery of the villages and the sons inherit these houses.

Vannar women totally involve themselves in the occupation of washing clothes and sharing the work with their men. Hence they normally keep themselves away from any other economic activity. Besides washing clothes, they do all the domestic work and look after their children. They take part in the rituals and social functions in their homes but do not have any role in the mechanism of social control.

As soon as a person dies in a Vannar family, message is carried to relatives by the village vetiyan or thoti (belonging to the Parayan community). Every family, which receives the death news,

175. Interview with Govidan, Washerman, Mohanur, 26 May 2005.
pays some cash and some paddy to the messenger. The bereaved family keeps a lighted oil lamp near the head of the body and prepares a bamboo bier. When the relatives arrive, they apply oil on the body and then bathe it. The body is then dressed with new clothes and adorned with flowers. They place it on the bier and carry it to the cremation ground. Vannars have their own cremation ground. They carry two new pots, one containing fire and the other water. Those who could afford cremation, cremate the body, while others bury it. The vettiyan or thoti digs the pit for the burial. Whether it is cremation or burial, the chief mourner carries the pot of water on his shoulder and circumambulates the body three times and then breaks the pot by throwing it down. On the next day, milk is taken to the cremation ground and poured on the grave or, in the case of cremation, on the bones.

On the eighth day, all close relatives bring eatables to the house and offer them to the departed soul in the nadu veedu (place of worship). On the 15th day, the thali of the widow is removed and put in a milk pot. On the 16th day kariyam (obsequies), the village brahmin priest officiates the purificatory ceremony to end the death pollution. Every year, during the Tamil month of Purattasi (September – October), ceremony is conducted in memory of the deceased.

Washing the clothes of people is the main occupation of the Vannars, for which work they get 6 marakkal (about forty eight litres) of paddy at each harvest, from each house they serve. In addition to this, they collect cooked food from each house of their patrons every day, both in the morning and evening. They usually get some extra food and cash whenever the girl in the patron’s

176. Interview with Murugan, V., Washerman, Mohanur Village, 27 May 2005.
house attains puberty or a woman gives birth to a child. This is because of the extra washing work done during those occasions. The clothes worn by the girl on the day of attaining puberty are given to the washerwoman. Yet, many of them are dissatisfied with their living conditions in the villages and have migrated to urban areas where they run laundries or work as washer men. They prefer urban areas because they are paid in cash.

Whenever there is any dispute in a Vannar family, the elders in the family or village are approached to settle the same. In the urban area, if they have problem they cannot settle locally, they go to police station or court to solve them. They worship their deities once a year in the month of Adi (July – August) and also whenever there is a marriage or prolonged sickness in the family. Pongal and Deepavali are the two important festivals they celebrate. They get the services of the local Brahmin priest to perform their life cycle rituals. Vannars accept water and cooked food from all communities in the region except the barber, the parayar and the jogi. Vannars and barbers extend free services to each other. All castes take the service of the Vannars and make payment either in cash or in kind. In rural areas, they have their own land for cremations or burial. Nowadays their life style has undergone some changes after they have moved into government position and business etc.

No wonder Vannars at present send their wards to schools and colleges. In Periyakkottai Panchayat villages, they have only


primary schools and have to travel long distances to study in a high school. In such cases, girls are not sent for higher studies. They make use of both modern and traditional medication. They are aware of family planning. They have access to all civic amenities and have been benefited by the rural development programmes.

**Wandering Caste-Koravar**

The Koravar community are called *Inji* Kuravar and *Munki* Kuravar. The *Munki* Kuravars know the technique of making *munki koodai* (bamboo basket) and hence the label. Nowadays they have formed a ‘Malai Kuravan Association’ at the State level and they are fighting to get the Scheduled Tribe status for themselves. They generally camp at street corners and near markets in urban areas.

They speak a dialect known as Koravabhasha. This dialect, however, is being spoken by the elders only for private conversations. At Mohanur village, they have one male and two female, a total of three persons.

They follow the clan system (kulas). The kulas are exogamous and marriages within the same *kula* is prohibited. Marriages are negotiated with an *uramorangar* (brother in law). Mother’s brother’s daughter and father’s sister’s daughter and eldest sister’s daughter are the most common marriage alliances. Monogamy is the marital norm. The age of marriage for boys is 25 and for girls it is 20. *Metti* and *mangalasutra* are the symbols of a married woman. *Parisam* (bride price) was paid in the past. It has now been replaced by *varadakshinai* (dowry). The rule of inheritance is matrilineal.

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Divorce is sanctioned with the approval of the headman of the community, on grounds of adultery, lack of male issue, barrenness, cruelty and maladjustment and remarriage. Koravars are non-vegetarians, and they eat pork. Ragi and rice are their staple food. They eat all available pulses, vegetables, roots and tubers. Groundnut and gingelly oil are used for cooking. They drink tea, coffee and milk. Both men and women drink sararyam (arrack). Beedi and cigarette smoking is common among them. Betel – chewing with tobacco is common. Snuff is rarely used. Koravars accept cooked food and water from the Kallar, Agamudaiyar, Muthuraja, Chettiar and Brahmin castes but do not accept water and food from the Adi Dravidar and Arundathiyar communities. They share burial grounds and water sources with other communities.

Gandharvakottai Koravars educate their sons upto college level and daughters upto school level. Boys drop out of school due to economic reasons and girls for social reasons. They have large families in this area and do not seem to adopt family planning. They have access to civic amenities.

The women have decision – making powers and control family expenditure. They mainly do domestic work, but also contribute to the family income by making palm leaf check baskets. They participate in social and religious activities.

Koravar Kalyanam (marriage) is generally conducted within a day. The headman officiates the function. The ceremony is usually

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183. Interview with Tharman, Mohanur Village, 27 July 2005.
185. Interview with Malar, *op.cit.*
conducted either at the bride’s home or in a public hall. The expenses of the wedding feast are equally shared by the families\textsuperscript{186}. The consummation ceremony is arranged at the bride’s natal home\textsuperscript{187}.

The pre-delivery ritual is conducted by the Koravar during the seventh or ninth month of a woman’s first pregnancy. After the ritual, the woman is ceremonially sent to her natal home for the delivery. The purificatory ritual is conducted on the sixteenth day after childbirth\textsuperscript{188}. On that day, both the child and the mother are given bath and a feast is arranged for relatives and neighbors and the naming ceremony is also performed on the same day.

Koravars conduct the puberty rituals to neutralise pollution for a period of 15 – 22 days. The girl returns to normal routine only on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} day after a purificatory ceremony. A feast is arranged for relatives and friends. The Koravars are Hindus and celebrate Adi Krithigai, Mahalaya Amavasya, Dussehra, Deepavali and Pongal.\textsuperscript{189}

Koravars usually live in nuclear families. Avoidance relationships exist between mother in law and son in law and father in law and daughter in law. Property is shared by the male heirs. The eldest son succeeds as head of the family\textsuperscript{190}. The traditional occupation of the Koravar community is making baskets from palm frond or bamboo splints\textsuperscript{191}. In rural area, they work as agricultural laborers during the rainy season when there is less demand for their

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{187} Sheela, J., \textit{op.cit}, pp.205-207.
\textsuperscript{188} Interview with Malar, \textit{op.cit}.
\textsuperscript{189} Interview with Tharuman, \textit{op.cit}.
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{191} \textit{Madras Musings}, Chennai, August 1-15, 2000,p.8.
goods and the raw materials\textsuperscript{192}. They have direct access to the market and they deal in cash and in kind.

Koravars bury their dead. They perform the death rites as karumathi for the departed soul. The grave is traditionally dug by a Scheduled Caste person. While carrying the corpse to the burial ground, folk – songs are sung. Death rites are conducted on the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 30\textsuperscript{th} day\textsuperscript{193}. The dead are also remembered annually.

\textbf{Menial Caste- Parayar}

The Parayar and Pallar are being called Dalits in the post – modern period in the Tamil society. Dalit means ‘oppressed’ in the Sanskrit language. In the Hebrew language, the root word \textit{Dal} is used to mean ‘crushed’ or ‘downtrodden’. Etymologically Dalits are broken or oppressed.\textsuperscript{194}

Parayars face deprivations and discriminations. These are intense and acute, multiple and overlapping. A Dalit has to face suffering in every aspect of his or her life from cradle to grave.\textsuperscript{195} However, these deprivations and discriminations are not just economic but are also social, cultural and political in nature. Illiteracy among Dalits is very high and they are exploited in more ways than one. Untouchability in villages is widespread, including the use of ‘two glass system’ – one for Dalits and the other for caste Hindus – in tea shops. Any transgression of this delicate line of social behavior brings in immediate and often brutal reprisals.

\textsuperscript{193} Interview with Malar, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{194} Azariah, M., \textit{Mission in Christ's Way in India Today}, Madras, 1989, p.92
\textsuperscript{195} \textit{The Hindu}, Trichy, 23 August 2005, p.15.
Smoking in front of *caste Hindus*, and walking in the main part of the village wearing chappals could invite reprisals\(^{196}\). But the most brutal form of reprisal relates to honor killings of the couple by caste Hindus in cases of inter-caste marriages involving a Dalit.

The discriminations are also political in nature. Often their right to vote was taken away through violent means and in some cases there was violent reprisal by the police because Dalits decided to boycott elections to demand reservations for Dalits\(^{197}\).

There is very little solace for a Dalit in religion or even in death and various types of discriminations continue in these spheres. The religious rights of the Dalit to worship are often severely restricted\(^{198}\). The burial grounds for Dalits often lack proper approach roads and attempts to reach these grounds through land belonging to ‘caste Hindus’ invite reprisals.

The book, *Dalits in Dravidian Land*, seems to indicate that Dravidian parties certainly have a lot to answer in this regard. The Dravidian Movement in the State provided socio-political and cultural space for the deprived sections to assert themselves for progress\(^{199}\). The gainers in this process were largely the middle class and the assertion by the Dalits could hardly be facilitated by this Dravidian Movement.


\(^{199}\) *Ibid.*
In the Periyakottai Panchayat, Parayan community is re-defined as *Harijan*[^200], the term suggested by Mahatma Gandhi to equate all untouchable castes on par with others. The word *Parayan* is said to be derived from *parai*, a drum. "Parayans delight in drum beating and are generally called on to act as drummers at funerals, marriages and village festivals of Tamil Sudras"[^201]. The Census Report of 1891 says that there were 348 subdivisions among them. But at present, they deny this and assert that there could never be so many divisions of subgroups among them at any stage though division prevails among them. It is true that the nature of their profession ensures the division. There are some who dig graves or attend to funeral rites in the cremation ground and they are called *Vettiyan*[^202] and parayans who blow a kind of pipe called *tharai* during the funeral procession are called *Panisaivan*. However there is no restriction on intermarriage among these groups. They are the sons of the soil and they are spread all over the State. In the Periyakkottai Panchayat consisting of Periyakkottai, Mohanur and Kothakapatti, the total number of Parayan population is 576 male, and 588 female, a total of 1,164 persons. They speak Tamil and use the Tamil script. Parayars are a branch of Scheduled Caste category.

They are non-vegetarians who eat beef and pork also. Their staple food are millets, ragi and rice, supplemented by wheat in recent times. They consume all locally available pulses, roots, tubers and vegetables. Groundnut oil is used for cooking. Fruits, milk, and milk products, coffee and tea are also consumed by them.

The men take alcoholic drinks but the women folk do not consume. It is said that some men spend a major part of their income on alcoholic drinks. Men smoke *beedis* and cigarettes\textsuperscript{203}. Both men and women chew betel with nuts, lime and tobacco. Some men and women use snuff.

They are aware of their low rank in the regional social hierarchy. Their elders still remember the past when they were humiliated. They could not wear clean clothes and were not allowed to wear the dhoti or *lungi* below the knees. Further they could not walk on the main streets in the village where the high castes lived and they were not even allowed to wear footwear or hold an umbrella. Nowadays, they say that their living conditions have improved much and they do not suffer all those humiliations associated with the past.

When a Parayar girl attains puberty, her maternal uncle’s family is informed of it first. They have to erect an enclosure within the house with plaited green coconut leaves. The girl is given a bath, made to wear a sari and sit inside the enclosure. For eight days she is given gingelly oil with an egg early in the morning. During the day, she is given a special diet of *pullu*, *idli*, *dos* and *vada* brought by close kith and kin, besides the usual food. On the ninth day, she is bathed by all the married women present at the ceremony and given a new sari to wear. All those present for this ritual are then served a special meal. Parayars allow a man to marry his sister’s daughter or his father’s sister’s daughter or his mother’s brother’s daughter. A widower may marry his wife’s younger sister or others. But Parayar girls are normally married

\textsuperscript{203} Interview with Raman, A., *Farmer*, Mohanur Village, 26 April 2004.
soon after attaining puberty. In the modern period, girls marry after they are 18 years old and boys after 25. The boy’s family used to take the initiative in the past in arranging a marriage but nowadays marriages by elopement and also marriages in which the girl’s family takes the initiative are on the increase. Monogamy is the standard practice. The *thali* and toe-rings are the symbols of marriage\(^\text{204}\). On the *nichayathartham* (betrothal) day, the bridegroom’s family brings a set of new clothes for the bride and cosmetic items such as flowers, betel nuts, betel leaves and at least one full bunch of bananas for distribution among the Parayar families in the settlement. The bride’s family arranges for some pots of toddy, and it is compulsory for bridegroom’s party to organize twice that quantity of toddy. The bride’s and bridegroom’s fathers formally agree to the matrimonial alliance. Keeping a small pot (*mondhai*) of toddy in their hands, they pronounce the marriage agreement and exchange the *mondhai* with each other. This is called *mondhai kalakkal* and it is an important ritual. But this custom has been replaced by the exchange of plates containing betel leaves, marriage *saree*, flowers and areca nuts in the recent times. Thereafter, all men enjoy the toddy\(^\text{205}\). Finally bride’s family provides a special food.

The date for a Parayan marriage is fixed by the Valluva *Pandaram* priest. Soon the bride’s party reaches the temple in the bridegroom’s village in a bullock cart. The bridegroom’s family receives them, offers them coffee or some soft drink and areca nuts and betel leaves. They are then led to the venue of the wedding and


given food. The next morning they cook rice, make big balls of it and keep them in the place where the marriage is to be celebrated. These are offerings to the deities. These rice balls are then given to their barber, washerman, their two nattamaikarar (panchayat heads) and the varian (the messenger). The thali – tying is the most important ritual in the marriage. After that, all the elders pour two handfuls of rice each on a mat in front of the new couple. Rice for this is provided by the bridegroom’s family. The rice collected on the mat is shared by the service communities. Then the couple sow the navdhanya (nine cereals) in a spot near the well in the house. By evening, the bride’s party starts for their village along with the bride and the bridegroom. The consummation ceremony is arranged at the bride’s residence. They stay there for five to seven days, and then return to bridegroom’s home with traditional gifts such as vessels, sweets and fruits\textsuperscript{206}.

Parayars do not observe the pre-delivery ritual. The first delivery of a pregnant woman is in her natal home. The mother and child are said to be polluted for eight days. On the ninth day, the village barber’s wife gives a ritual bath to the mother and child to end the pollution\textsuperscript{207}. During the third month, their priest is called to name the child. Tonsuring and ear – piercing are done for both male and female children before they attain five years of age\textsuperscript{208}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{208} Interview with Thanalaksmi, S., \textit{SHG}, Periyakkottai, 25 May 2005.
\end{itemize}
Divorce is permitted in the Parayar community on grounds of adultery, barrenness, cruelty and insanity. Their community Panchayat deals with the case and formally approves the divorce. Compensation is paid to the aggrieved party whether it is the husband or the wife. If the children are very young, they normally stay with the mother. In cases where the children are adolescents and the husband is a drunkard or irresponsible, then the children stay with the mother. Widow remarriage is permitted.

Parayars live in both nuclear and joint families. They have no avoidance relationships among family members. The residence after marriage is decided by the man. All sons share the parental properties equally. The eldest son in the family succeeds his father as the head of the family. Most Parayar women work as agricultural labourers. They participate in the community’s social and religious functions. Women do not have any decision-making powers. In Periyakottai Panchayat, girls are not sent to school after they attain puberty.

Parayars either cremate or bury their dead. They have a separate burial ground. Their funeral rites are very simple. The body is carried on a bier constructed with bamboo wood and palm leaf mats. Some engage men to dance before the funeral procession all the way to the place of cremation. On the day of cremation, only the chief mourners – the sons of the deceased – have their heads shaved. But on the 16th day, when they do kariyam (final death

rites for the dead), all the agnatic kin present have to get their heads shaved. They used to observe pollution for 15 days, from the day of death. The ash collected in a new pot was disposed of in a nearby river or stream. On the third or fifth day after the death, the *pal sadangu*, or milk pouring ceremony, takes place. On the 16th day, their *Valluva Pandaram* priest conducts the *kariyam* and then the pollution ends. The *thali* — removing ritual is observed by the widow of the deceased on the 15th night. During the 16 days, they take only vegetarian food. Only on the 17th day, they cook non-vegetarian food and serve it to the relatives who attend the *kariyam*\(^{212}\). They worship their ancestors at least once a year during festive or ceremonial occasions.

Land is the main economic resource of the Parayars. Traditionally they are agricultural labourers\(^{213}\). Now a few of them own little land. But almost all Parayar families earn their livelihood as agricultural labour. In the past, due to their inability to return the loans they had taken from their masters, they, along with their family members, were forced to serve the same landlord, accepting whatever wages they provided. Of late, the attitude of the landlords towards these labourers has changed considerably for the better\(^{214}\) due to legislative intervention.

Of late the Parayars have started to realize the value of formal education for their children. The educated individuals

among them have taken up white-collar jobs in government and private service. As the schools in the rural areas give free education and also free meals to children attending school, many Parayar families send their children to school instead of sending them to work as labourers. In rural areas, they receive payment in cash as well as in kind.

Cases of disputes between individuals or groups, leading to violence, cases of extramarital relations within the Parayan community or with outsiders, and petty thefts come up occasionally. They have two nattamaikarars\(^{215}\) (leaders) for each settlement. They also have a varian, whose duty is to announce when a Panchayat meeting is being summoned or communicate any information to the members of the community. On the day of the Panchayat meeting, male elders in the community join the nattamaikarar, and in the presence of all the assembled men, the person accused is asked to explain. The nattamaikarar tries to settle the differences and levy a fine on the offender. In the case of divorce or separation, the spouse asking for the divorce is made to pay some money to the other. But nowadays people approach the police and court also.

Their village goddess is Mariamman, Kaliamman and Karuppu.\(^ {216}\) They also worship the regional deities such as Murugan, Amman, Perumal. Pongal, being an agricultural harvest festival\(^ {217}\), is the most important festival for the Parayar. Deepavali and Karthigai are also celebrated by them. There are a few Parayars who are converted to Christianity.

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216. Interview with Santhi, K., Periyakkottai, 26 July 2005.
217. Interview with Murali, R., Periyakkotai, 26 July 2005.
Parayars have their own priest, barber and washerman. The community has economic relationships with the peasant communities. In rural areas, these traditional links are obligatory and keep the various communities close and united\textsuperscript{218}.

Other communities do not accept cooked food and water from the Parayars. But the Parayars accept water and cooked food from the other communities. In Periyakkottai Panchayat areas, they have their own water sources and cremation grounds. Parayars also visit the temples which other communities visit. They participate in the traditional festivals.

Caste has its merits and demerits. In the present age of rationalism, it is realized that the defects outweigh its merits. The caste and casteism have imposed disastrous consequences on Hindu society. Each caste tries to prove that it is equal to a 'superior' caste and superior to its 'equals'. Many castes and sub castes appear, which lead to acrimony and caste rivalry. Exclusiveness and bitterness follow. In politics, the caste practices, distinctions and animosities lead to frustration and failure to achieve the proper ideals of democracy\textsuperscript{219}. In the study area of Periyakottai Panchayat, attempts by the untouchables to alter their style of life or to assert their civic rights are often resented rather than opposed by the upper and dominant castes. Consequently, they develop a spirit of discontent towards the entire order. This situation is much exploited by the Christians and Muslims who “found in them a fertile field for their conversion activities”.

\textsuperscript{218} Nirupama Prakash, \textit{op.cit}, p.147.
\textsuperscript{219} Virendra Prakash Sing, \textit{op.cit}, pp. 48-49.