Chapter V

Caste Panchayat
CHAPTER- V

CASTE PANCHAYAT

Society is the field of action and the individual is the source of action. In India social configuration is determined by caste values. Hierarchy, inequality and regimentation are the basic characteristics of the caste system. The social stratification based on birth contributed to the evolution of caste system in India. While the administrative needs of the Periyakottai region were looked after by the institutions of local self-government like Village Panchayats established by the State, the social and religious needs were looked after by Caste Panchayats whose decisions were final and such decisions were immediately obeyed. For Caste Panchayats, tradition and precedent are the unwritten, conventional code of law.

The social landscape of Periyakottai consisted of elite castes like Brahmins, dominant castes like Kallars and Agamudaiyars, mercantile castes like Chettiyars, dependent castes like Mutharaiyars and service castes like Untouchables. The working of some of the Caste Panchayats determined the role of the various caste people.

The social structure of the dominant caste, the Kallar, is based on clan system.* Different social groups based on different

4. Nicholas, B. Dirks, op.cit., p. 247 ff

* ‘Clan’ means the people of the same lineage.
clans interacted with each other and contributed to the dominance of martial castes like Kallar and Agamudaiyar. Peasant colonization led to the conversion of innumerable virgin tracts. According to R. Radhakrishna Ayyar, Kallars settled in Trans Vellar Region and Maravars settled in the Cis Vellar Region. Other social groups were subordinated to the domination of martial castes. Domination is the exploitation of man by man. Dominance did not require numerical majority alone but ability to use coercive power. In other words, the measure of violence employed was the yardstick that counted very much in the domination of the countryside.

The social structure of the Agamudaiyars and Kallars is well organised. It is based on territory and caste. The innumerable sub-castes claim particular territory as their Nadu. Such a claim is strengthened by matrimonial connections. The head of a lineage is called Karai Ambalam. The head of ur is called ur Ambalam. The head of Nadu is called Nattu Ambalam. These Ambalams perform decision making and rule adjudicating role. But these rules were not reduced to writing. Tradition and unwritten law form the basis of their decisions. The head of the Caste Panchayat is Ambalam.

---

   • This is the rural reality even today.
   • Karai Ambalam, Ur Ambalam, Nattu Ambalam still play an important role in rural temple festivals.
Precedents are more important than any laws or regulations. *Lineage Ambalam, Ur Ambalam* and *Nattu Ambalam* determined everything in the Periyakottai rural side. For running the Panchayat, they collect a levy called *Mahamuni*. Fines and *Mahamuni* provided the means to spend for public purpose.

**Functions of Caste Panchayat**

As soon as a theft is reported in the village, the *Ambalam* immediately goes into action. He restores the lost article to the owner after investigation. If the article lost is not found, the *Ambalam* would compensate the loss from his own resource pocket. Bullocks are indispensable to the peasants. Loss of bullock would deprive the peasant of the benefit of agricultural operation. When the bullocks are lost, the matter is reported to the *Ambalam*. After collecting *tuppu -coolie,* the *Ambalam* searches the country side and finally the bullock is restored to the owner. This practice is followed so as to extract a little money from the owner. Sale of a stolen bullock to a third party is a grave offence. Family dispute also is being settled amicably. Hindu marriage is a sacrament. Matrimonial relations in some cases are not cordial. *Ambalam* analyses the pros and cons of matrimonial discord. When the parties are unwilling to function as husband and wife, the *Ambalam* sanctions divorce. Decision of the *Ambalam* is accepted without any protest. Some times the *Ambalam* issues a ban on the rearing of goats called *velladu* because it causes serious crop damage. Faction fights in the rural side, anti social activities like rioting, feuds, irrigation dispute, land dispute, encroachment of the village

- 'Tuppu-cooly' is fees for giving intelligence.
common, auspicious ploughing during Tamil New Year, village festivals, temple festival, regulation of precedents in temple etc, never escape the attention of **Ambalam**, the head of the Caste Panchayat. Village feuds are settled by the imposition of fines on the culprits. Sometimes, it is not possible for the culprit to pay the amount. In that case the culprit would prostrate before **Ambalam** for the reduction or cancellation of fine.

Temple respects are seriously contested. It provides social prestige. Invariably, the **Ambalams** are being honoured first. As leaders of local society, they dominate the religious landscape in the countryside. K.R.Venkatrama Ayyar has documented the working of Caste Panchayats in Periyakottai and other rural areas of Pudukkottai. Some typical examples are very peculiar. Among the **Valaiyars**, divorce is permitted on payment of the price for the bride. The male children are generally allowed to go with the husband and females with the wife.

Caste disputes among the Untouchables are being settled by **Periyathankaran**. Appeals could be made to **pattaraikaran**. Then the final appeal could be made to **Desam Chetti** of Vaithur whose decision is final. Disputes among the **Pallars** are heard by **Ur Kudumban**. From **Ur Kudumban** the appeal could go to the **Nattu Kudumban** and from **Nattu Kudumban** the final appeal could go to the **Ezunattu Kudumban**. Among the **Idayars**, widow remarriage is generally not advocated. The **Chettiars** are divided into divisions based on temples. They have a **Periyathankaran** for each locality.

who generally settles their minor disputes in consultation with other people of the area. Serious cases are decided in their respective temples before the presence of trustees. But widow remarriage is prohibited.

The name Kammalas represents the five artisan classes or Panchalas. The five craftsmen were gold-smiths (tattan), black-smiths (kollan or karuman), brass-smiths (kannan), carpenters (tachchan), and sculptors or stone masons (kal tachchan). Each of the five sections of Kammalas elects Nattamaikara and Karayastha to settle disputes between them. All the five Nattamaikaras are elected by the representatives of the five divisions.

Agamudaiyar and Kallar generally assemble in the Sangalamman temple to discuss questions of common importance. Periyakottai Agamudaiyar and Kallar are law abiding and peaceful community.

Kusavars are potters. For arbitrating caste disputes, they are divided into four Nadus - Kanna Nadu, Konna Nadu, Siruvasal Nadu and Kavinadu. For barbers, there is Periyathanakaran whose arbitration is final. The caste assembly of washermen is called nattu kutams.

Thus, it is crystal clear that the activities of Caste Panchayat determine the social interaction. The activities of Caste Panchayat of non-martial castes are generally social, religious and ritual in a

homogeneous village occupied by a single caste. The decision of the Caste Panchayat is unchallenged. In multi-caste villages, the Panchayat of the dominant castes of either the Kallar or Agamudaiyar could enforce their decision because of their ability to use the coercive power. Sometimes, frictions in any multi-caste village could invite police investigation and judicial arbitration. There is social equilibrium but not social justice. Castes are not water-tight compartments. Inter-caste relations are mutual but unequal. The Caste Panchayats also flourished under Thondaiman of Pudukkottai State. But after independence, the decision of Panchayats has no legal sanction. Nevertheless, social sanction is given to them by respective castes. Ex-communication is practised. The caste conflicts and separate utensils for untouchables are in practice. If a man happens to be the president of a Caste Panchayat and Sircar Panchayat, he would be very powerful in the country side of Periyakottai.

**Ambalams**

Some Nattu headmen (nattampalams) are considered so powerful that whatever they say would happen. A curse uttered from their lips carries great danger and their blessings are widely sought after. They muster a crowd of loyal supporters in a matter of minutes. The Antakuti Servaikarar (a title he had assumed) is one of the most powerful head men. At his call, 50,000 people could be immediately organized. He fed many every day. All the servant (adimai) castes in the area call him appa (father). In addition to working on his lands, they do whatever job he requires of them without specific remuneration. If times are hard, they are fed and

---

sheltered by him and he always keeps large stocks of grain on hand. Feeding is the most appropriate and the most effective way of securing one's authority and other's dependence. The administrative heads of Panchayat often send presents to the *Ambalams* in order to ensure his support to them.\(^{16}\)

In the village of Periyakottai, there was once a panchayat official by the name of *Alakayya*. He was very harsh and used to beat people for no reason. The *Ambalam* found fault with *Alakayya* and drove him away. But the village official was honest and a just person. He never nursed any desire for other's property. Wherever he went, he took his own food so that no one else would have to feed him. He had a large moustache that two people could hang on each side of it. *Alakayya* became very angry and challenged *Ayyacami* (the Ambalam) and said, “What kind of *Ambalam* are you? Will God say that I made a mistake? Will the lizard chirp in the place that you choose?” *Ayyacami* said “It would”. He put a stick in the centre of the tank. Immediately, a huge tree lizard jumped from the tree on the bank of the tank, swam to where the pole was, climbed it and chirped three times. Because of *Ambalams* like the one referred to here, the days were pleasant and happy. There were seasonal rains and good harvests. But in later days, people became bad. No wonder their had been no rain for a long period.\(^{17}\)

Such stories are frequently told, eclipsing the grander stories of kings and emperors. *Ambalams* were seen as little kings, both in their own right as well as representatives of the local communities.

---

The Ambalams were vested with responsibility to sustain dharma. “If they do this, the moral and natural world would be ordered, and the country side under their jurisdiction would be prosperous”.\(^{18}\)

The Ambalams were responsible for the maintenance of peace and the protection of property. If anything was stolen, it was their responsibility to recover it or make good the loss to the unfortunate victims. They employed their authority to guarantee the behaviour and possessions of the people under their command.\(^{19}\) There are many stories about thefts of goods which were recovered within hours by the Ambalams.

In another instance, the Ambalam showed his influence and power like a king. When something was stolen in his area, he should recover it within twelve hours. A cow was stolen from the house of a Brahmin when he went to harvest his fields in Melatematipatti. He went to Ambalam and told him the problem “Look, under your authority (atikaram) such things are happening”. The Ambalam told him not to worry, to go home and rest assured that the cow would come back by that evening. Of course it did.\(^{20}\)

The position of the Ambalam as the protector of property and the guarantor of peace was further strengthened by his role in the various assemblies. Disputes over issues such as divorce, marriage, adultery, irrigation, boundaries, and village or locality festivals were settled in these assemblies. Presiding over these assemblies, the

18. Ibid., p.281.
20. Ibid.
Ambalams arbitrated the disputes brought before them. The authority of the Ambalam was complemented by that of the village or sub-caste deity, in whose temple compound the assembly usually meets. A special puja was often performed on these occasions. Significantly, the Ambalam's role was not so much to punish the offender as to restore communal harmony. The fines for most offences were relatively minor, usually taking the form of a donation to the village temple for the annual festival. Fines were assessed according to the seriousness of the crime and the pecuniary position of the offender. More important than any material transfer, however, were the public contrition of the offender and the restoration of peace and honour between disputants. Entrusted with the regulation and control (kattuppatu) of social action and caste interaction in his area, the Ambalam, again mirroring the traditional king, was responsible for maintaining the local order of things.21

In the olden days the Ambalam was granted tax free lands called maniyams and umbalams by the king. In one sense, these grants simply confirmed the original and privileged rights of settlement (kaniyatci) appropriated by the head of a lineage or a sub-caste. In another sense, however, the grants were honours bestowed by the king upon his representative in a village or locality - grants which both marked and rewarded the privileged recipient of royal favour. In the nineteenth century, these grants were rationalised and the inams were specified as remuneration for simple services performed. In course of time the official position of Ambalam - which had state recognition and for which inam lands were transferred- became

21. Ibid.
designated as that of *miracidar*. The person who had been the *ambalam* usually continued as the new *miracidar*, although there were disputes between contestants within families as well as cases where another contestant from a different lineage was awarded the position by the state. Although there were disputes in the eighteenth century, traditional stories suggested that the king had the right to adjudicate disputes and to appoint whomever he desired for the local position. But the king was aware that the local *Ambalam* derived his authority from the local community as well as from his own position of strength. Doubtless both the hereditary nature of the position as well as major realignments of local power were considered by the king while arbitrating these issues. While disputes over this position were continuous, significant changes took place both in the specification of local authority and in the criteria involved in the resolution of the local disputes.\(^2\)

The authority of the *Ambalam* in the old regime came from a number of different though interdependent sources. The *Ambalam* was the headman of the first lineage of the dominant caste within a village or a *nadu*. As the representative of the community, the headman was *primus inter pares*, first among equals rather than first over subordinates. As the representative of the king, however, he transcended the social whole. Signified by *maniyam* lands, privileges of position and service, and emblems of this office, this latter form of authority had the immediate effect of separating the head from his group and incorporating him into a higher sovereignty. The representative quality of the headman, however, made him the medium

through which the entire community was incorporated into the sovereignty of the king. Thus in the old regime the Ambalam could not be two separate people, one a caste headman and other a government servant. The two sources of authority were structurally and conceptually interdependent. Only during the colonial regime did the possibility, however rarely enacted, of these positions of miracidar and ambalam being held by different persons arise.\textsuperscript{23}

The authority of the Ambalam is perhaps most eloquently displayed in the temple. There he receives first honours on behalf of his community. These honours are seen as marks of prestige and sources of merit for the individual who receives them. They are emblems or badges of office. Thus temple honour becomes the most valued prerequisite of any office in the village system. The first honour for the Ambalam signifies that the Ambalam, like the priest, mediated the distribution of all honours to the local community. The honours to be distributed to the rest of the village are handed over by the priests to the Ambalam, and then by the Ambalam to the members of the village community. The Ambalam thus acts as in loco regalis, the fountain of honour. During temple festivals, the Ambalam also displays the emblems of his authority which were handed down from his ancestors and sometimes granted by kings.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., pp.281-283.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.