Introduction
INTRODUCTION

Formation of Villages

Villages are the backbone of India. It is a country of rural people and majority of Indians live in villages. The development of the Indian nation is a function of the development of her villages. In ancient India, society developed in a series of ascending formations starting from the family and gradually extending to the village and culminating in the vast units of the state. Kautilya gives a clear picture of a village. According to Kautilya, a village consisted of not less than a hundred families and not more than five hundred families of people who were mostly engaged in agriculture. He adds that the village should be with boundaries extending to a minimum distance of a krosa (200 to 250 yds.). The lowest administrative unit in the country is a village.

Caste – Origin and Development

The word ‘Caste’ is derived from the Portuguese word ‘caste’, signifying breed, race or kind. The first use of ‘caste’ occurs in 1563 in the writing of Garcia de Orata. Caste was used by the French to refer to breed. It is not known whether the Portuguese or the French used it originally in this sense but the possibility is that the Portuguese were the first to coin the word\(^1\).

The word ‘caste’ is used in everyday life and it is being used to distinguish one person from another or a category. It is used to indicate that such and such a person belongs to a particular caste.

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1. Pillay, K.K., *Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu*, Madras, 1979, p.292
In saying so, it is meant that he or she is born to such parents or is a member of the family said to belong to a particular caste. In this way caste signifies a hereditary group. In biology this word is used only for descent or heredity. But this definition is inadequate for the purpose of sociology since it requires a more comprehensive and clear definition. Caste can be defined as a hereditary, endogamous group which decides the individuals’ status, his profession etc within the social stratification.

The word *Jati* or caste used in India specifies a sub-division of a larger division. But *Varna*, which is based on colour or race signifies the social division. In the Post-Vedic Period, the four-fold division appeared in North India. Over the ages, subsequent to the epoch of Brahmanas, there appeared the caste or subdivisions of the *Varna*. While there were four *Varnas*, there have been well over three thousand castes or *Jatis*. A *Jati* is partly occupational and partly a sociological sub-division within each *Varna*. Caste is sometimes identified with the class. Caste is based on birth, conferring social status while class is primarily a result of economic criteria.\(^2\)

The indigenous social stratification among the early Tamils was based on physiographic distinctions, which justified different occupations. The five-fold divisions of the ancient Tamilagam were Kurinchi, Mullai, Marudham, Neydal and Palai. The residents of these regions came to be known as Maravar, Kuravar, Ayar, Ulavar and Paradavar respectively.\(^3\) With the large scale migration of Aryans into Tamil regions, the indigenous division and sub-

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divisions based on occupation came to be amalgamated with the four-fold divisions\(^4\). But P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar observed that the Indo-Aryans did not succeed in categorising the people of Tamilagam into four Varnas as they could in North India\(^5\).

“A caste may be defined as a collection of families, or groups of families, bearing a common name, which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, following the same professional calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single and homogeneous community.” Criticising this definition of caste, Hutton observed that the people who claim descent from a mythical ancestor are not members of caste.

Tamil society was never ordered on the Varnashrama pattern, in spite of the oft-quoted statement of Tolkappiyar regarding the four communities of Andanar, Arasar, Vaisiyar and Vellalar. For some reason, Tolkappiyar merely sought to classify the Tamil society into these four divisions on the North Indian pattern, but that classification does not represent the social reality of the Sangam period\(^6\). Firstly, the Arasar (kings and princes) here cannot be equated with the Kshatriya community of the northern classification. Secondly, the Sudra class was missing in the classification of Tolkappiyar, and the Vellalar cannot be equated with the Sudras. Thirdly, the right of inter-marriage granted to the Arasar and the Vellalar defeated the rigour of the northern varna division. For these and other reasons, some

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 313
\(^6\) Pillay, K.K., *Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu*, op.cit., p. 316
scholars have dismissed the four-fold division to be inadequate to explain the Tamil social stratification.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purport of this study is to study the operation of caste factor in Periyakottai Panchayat. Hence it proposes to study caste formations, mobilisation of caste groups, formation of associations based on caste divisions, caste ranking, caste's influence over politics, caste based occupation of the villagers, agrarian set up, land owning class and landless labourers, activities of village councils and caste panchayats and autonomy of the panchayats in the post colonial period of Periyakkottai Panchayat in Gandarvakottai taluk, Pudukkottai district.

It also seeks to find out the rural set up, formation of the society, demography of the villages in Gandarvakkottai union, background of agro-based economy and non-agricultural economy, linkages between religious - caste groups, village administration patterns of land holding and host of other related questions. On the whole, the study attempts to focus on the socio-economic aspects, particularly the role of caste in the village settlement and village politics.

**Objectives of the Study**

- to find out the influence of caste in the day-to-day activities of the village life.
- to find out the peculiar features of each caste and community identified in the villages.
- to trace out the agrarian based land pattern in the villages.
to measure the economic status and position of various people.

to highlight the role of caste in the village politics.

to trace the activities of the panchayats in the pre-panchayat 73rd Amendment period and in the post-73rd Amendment period in the Gandarvakottai taluk.

to study caste and kinship and the network of social relations involving genealogical connection and affinity between persons in a community which cut across villages and extend to a wider region.

to trace the role of women in agrarian activities, their involvement in panchayat raj, empowerment of women, their ascendancy in power and their participation in the developmental activities.

Hypotheses

The study attempts to test the following hypotheses

➢ Caste plays a vital role in the village set up

➢ Leaders of dominant caste play an active role in the functioning of village administration.

➢ The implementation of 73rd Amendment of the Constitution of India ensures direct participation of all people in the reconstruction of village.

➢ The empowerment of women and dalits through Panchayat impacts the transformation of the village community.
Significance and Theorization of the Study

British colonial administrators in India in the first half of the nineteenth century were struck by the unique organisation of the village community. Munro, Metcalfe and Elphinstone noticed the immemorial features of this institution, which apparently survived the wreck of empires and dynastic revolutions. The Fifth Report of East India Company Affairs, published in 1812, mentions the constitution of this self-contained republic for the first time and since then foreign scholars and Indian writers have written on the “Little Republics” which sustained the agrarian economy through the ages. The organization of the village community has continued to exist with the same constitution and functions within the framework of the caste system, unaffected by the political changes that took place from time to time in the Indian Polity.

Contrary to this generalization, Baden Bowel maintains that the non-republican type was a Dravidian one, while the republican type was the result of colonization, conquests or grants.

Statement of the Problem

Over 70% of the Indian people live in villages. Approximately 5,00,000 villages are scattered throughout India. These settlements range from tiny hamlets of thatched huts to larger settlements of tile roofed, stone and brick houses. It is a wonder that the rural economy plays a vital role in the economic structure of the society, state and nation even to this day. Throughout India, the village dwellings are built very close to the tilled land surrounding them. Further, they are more spread out, reflecting the nature of the topography.
The houses of Dalits are generally located in separate neighbourhoods or on the outskirts of the nucleated settlements known as cheris. Gopal Guru calls them 'Internment Camps.' In Tamil Nadu, the socio-economic contrasts and the observance of caste-related pollution-purity concepts tend to be stronger in Brahmin settlements, known as agraharams which are set apart from those of non-Brahmins and dalit hamlets. The dalit residential areas are set at a little distance from the homes of other castes. Caste disparities are observed in every way, and it plays a vital role in the social relations.

The number of caste people varies from one village to another in Periyakottai Panchayat. Typically, Periyakottai village is dominated by one caste, the Kallars. M.N. Srinivas calls them 'dominant caste people' and they control the village land and on whose patronage members of minority caste groups must rely. Even though the Parayas, the low caste people, were economically sound in Periyakottai Village, they were placed in lower social status and they were under the control of dominant castes.

Large land owning communities in the Periyakottai revenue panchyat are Kallars, Agamudayars, and Yadavars. The dominant caste members own 80% of the village land, including the house sites. The low caste people own very meager lands for survival in the villages. In the beginning, the Brahmins were major land owners along with some other relatively high-ranking castes. But due to the migration of high caste people to the cities, most of the lands in Periyakottai Revenue Panchayat are now under the control of dominant castes.

dominant Kallars. In the villages of Periyakottai Panchayat, the Kallar and other Caste-Hindu land owners refrain from using ploughs themselves but hire tenant farmers and laborers who belong to lower castes to do the manual work. Those who belong to various service and artisan castes supply the needs of the villagers. They are priests, carpenters, black smiths, barbers, weavers, potters, oil pressers, leather workers, sweepers, water bearers, toddy tappers and so on. Artisans are involved in the pottery, wood, cloth, metal and leather works. Although diminishing, they live in the villages of Periyakottai Panchayat, which is basically an agrarian tract. Agriculture is the main occupation of the villagers. Sometimes the cultivators face many odds because of the failure or the late arrival of monsoons. The caste groups, who wield great influence, decide the political landscape of the villages.

**Area of Study**

The Periyakottai Revenue Panchayat, consisting of three villages, namely, Periyakottai, Mohanur and Koththakapatti, in Gandarvakottai taluk in Pudukkottai district has been chosen for this study. Periyakottai serves as a connecting link between these three villages which form a major panchayat in the Gandarvakottai Taluk.

**Period of Study**

The period of study covers the post-independent period from 1950 to 2005 for a period of half a century. In the year 1974, the Gandarvakottai taluk was separated from Thanjavur district for administrative reasons and annexed with Pudukkottai district. Many changes occurred in the agrarian relations and panchayats’ development due to the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution of India, which resulted
in the successful introduction of Panchayatraj institutions in villages like Periyakottai.

Methodology

The Periyakottai Panchayat is one of the economically backward panchayats in Pudukkottai district. For the purpose of study, primary data were collected through personal interviews and field survey. The primary data were also available in the village panchayat office, taluk office, and district headquarters. The study mainly depends on analytical method based on the data collected. However, a historical methodology has been followed to trace a lot of information to enrich the chronology of the study. This approach would help the understanding of the process of development through the period under study and ensure constructing and reconstructing the past in a spirit of presenting an objective study.

Sources

For writing the thesis entitled "Caste and Society: A Study of Panchayat in Tamil Nadu Since 1950", both primary and secondary sources were consulted. The present empirical study of village and society is a result of acquaintance with historical data pertaining to the three villages of Periyakkottai Panchayat. The primary source constitutes the materials available in the villages of Periyakottai Panchayat: village panchayat reports, revenue records, and census reports and so on. The researcher had the privilege of collecting relevant information through participant observation. As far as the collection of data pertaining to the three villages is concerned, interview method was followed. Interviews were focused on the land pattern, caste practices, social condition, customs and
conventions, practice of untouchability, operation of the panchayat system, cultural activities, the role of temple, caste panchayat and so on.

The lineage heads who are, among others, members of traditional village councils or caste panchayats, members of the inter-village nadu councils, presidents of the statutory village panchayats, village headmen, village accountants, the Brahmin priest of the village deity who is common to all, ex-MLAs and Chairmen of the panchayat and panchayat union provided the key sources of information.

The researcher had also the opportunity to witness some village statutory panchayat meetings, caste panchayat of Kallars, and temple festivals common to all people.

Apart from collecting empirical field-data, records such as those pertaining to inter-village disputes on various occasions like festivals of temples, caste disputes among the Mukkulathors, and disputes between Mukkulathor and lower castes, land and labour disputes, and other related documents available with certain private parties were also used for the study. In addition, district gazetteers, manuals and the reports available in the Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, have also been adequately used in this study.

Review of Literature:

In this regard K.R. Venkatarama Ayyar’s *A Manual of Pudukkottai State*, and N. Thiagarajan’s *A Manual of Pudukkottai State*, and *Gazetteer of India, Tamil Nadu State, Pudukkottai District* by Gopala Krishna Gandhi and Radha Krishna Aiyar’s *A
General History of the Pudukkottai State provide some general information about the villages in Periyakkottai Panchayat.

Besides, secondary sources provided flesh to the skeleton of this work. The secondary sources consist of the published works of both Indian and foreign scholars. The foreign scholar, Nicholas B. Dirks, devoted much attention to the general practices observed in Pudukkottai region. In his work, The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom, Dirks narrates critically the rule of Tondaimans, the function of caste panchayat, caste practices, and the role of political agents. His another work, 'Caste of mind' also gives ethno history of Pudukkottai region. Dirks argues that caste is an expression of Indian tradition. Caste is a modern phenomenon – the product of the encounter between India and British colonial rule. In the fourth chapter, ‘Social Identity in the Old Regime,’ he furnishes the practices of the dominant caste, Mukkulathors. K.S. Singh’s People of India, Tamil Nadu, Venkatasami Nattar’s Kallars’ Charithiram, Desingu Setty’s The Valayer of South India Society and Religion, M.N. Srinivas’ The Dominant Caste and Other Essays, Viswanathan’s Dalits in Dravidian Land, Saraswathi’s Minorities in Madras State, C.J. Fuller’s Caste To-day, S.V. DesikaChar Caste, Religion and Country, Rajini Kothari’s Caste in Indian Politics, K.P. Bahadur’s Caste Tribes – A Culture of India, Untouchables by K.R. Hanumanthan, Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu, Caste Politics and Society in Tamil Nadu by G. Palanithurai, G. Rengaraju’s Struggle for Temple Entry in Tamil Nadu (Unpublished Ph.D., Thesis), Robert L. Hardgrave’s The Dravidian Movement, Louis Dumont’s The Caste System and Its Implications, provide general
information on caste practices, operation of caste system and caste issues. Indu Rajagopal’s *The Tyranny of Caste*, J. Pandian’s *Caste Nationalism and Ethnicity*, and I. Udhayasankar’s *Backward Class Movement in Tamil Nadu* are the other works which deal with the role of dominant castes in the rural society.

S. Saraswathi’s *The Madras Panchayat System*, James Manor’s *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralisation*, *Grassroots Government* by G. Palanithurai are the major works which provided information on the working of the panchayat system.


Kathleen Gough’s *Rural Change in Southeast India, 1950s to 1980s*, Joan P. Mencher’s *Agriculture and Social Structure in Tamil Nadu* and Eugene F.Irschick, *Dialogue and History: Constructing South India-1795-1895* are the major works of the foreigners who concentrated on village study in Tamil Nadu at different areas. They provide general information about physical constraints in agriculture, land tenure relations, rural social classes, political structure and development of villages.

The notable works on caste and land relations are Dharama Kumar’s *Land and Caste in South India*, and Andre Beteille’s *Caste, Class and Power*. These works give a picture about the
prevailing general agrarian conditions in the villages. These works also deal with land disputes, cultivation, climatic condition, labour condition and so on.

These sources are reviewed and compared with one another to give a complete account on the subject of caste and society in Periyakkottai Panchayat during the post-colonial period. The sources are generally allowed to speak for themselves.

**Chapterization**

The thesis entitled "Caste and Society: A Study of Panchayat in Tamil Nadu since 1950" is formed into six chapters, besides an Introduction and Conclusion.

Theories related to the villages and caste system, the origin and development of the caste system, the villages in the Periyakottai Panchayat in particular and the purpose, objectives, hypotheses, statement of the problem, area, period, methodology, sources of the study are given in the Introduction.

"Topography, Settlement and Level of Development" forms the first chapter. It deals with the statistical figures of population of Tamil Nadu, physiography of Pudukkottai district, historical introduction to the region, demographic profile of Pudukkottai district, topographical features of Gandarvakottai taluk, village settlement pattern, population figures in villages, emergence of civic society, civic facilities, order of settlements, inadequacy in the development of settlements, villages’ march towards modernisation and urban influence, features of urban elements in the villages and the economic prospects.
“The Village Physiography” forms the second chapter. This chapter provides an account of the physical features of Periyakottai revenue panchayat, available facilities, available avenues for developmental activities, the settlement pattern, the disposition of streets with regard to one another, the centre for social gatherings, temples and general activities of the people.

“Caste Structure and Practices” forms the third chapter. This chapter elaborately deals with the caste practices of every caste in their social relations. This chapter also identifies the higher castes, dominant castes, functional castes, service castes and dependent castes within the jurisdiction of Periyakottai Panchayat. While identifying various castes, it deals with the cultural and social activities of every caste group. Festivals and religious activities of lower and higher castes are also narrated. The low caste people are not allowed into the temples of the Caste-Hindus, even though Temple Entry Act and Untouchability Abolition Act legally prohibited pollution-purity observances in the temples.

The fourth chapter is entitled “Land Pattern and Farming Scenario.” In this chapter, land cultivation and its associated agrarian activities in Periyakottai are narrated. Further, the wet crop and dry crop cultivation, nature of the barren land, animal wealth for agricultural operation, irrigational system through tanks and wells, land ownership pattern, individual or community proprietorship and trade activities on agrarian products are vividly depicted.

“Caste Panchayat” forms the fifth chapter. The social landscape of Periyakottai Panchayat consists of elite, dominant, and
dependent caste people. The working of the caste panchayats determines the place, ranking and role of various caste people. In the Periyakottai Panchayat, Kallars have organised caste panchayats. The institution of the caste panchayat is called Ambalam. For running the caste panchayat, levy and fines are collected regularly. The chapter also deals with the pivotal role being played by the ambalathars or the caste headmen in the caste ridden Tamil society.

"Panchayat System" forms the last chapter. This chapter deals with the nature of the village panchayat, caste factor in panchayat elections, panchayat function in the pre and post period of 73rd Amendment to the Constitution, composition of Panchayat bodies and committees, financial position, developmental activities, women empowerment, environmental issues and the role of Self-Help Groups in the economic activities and promotion of cottage industries.

In Conclusion, research findings are given in a sequential way in the light of the hypotheses framed. The constitutional development brought about structural changes in village governance and relations which appeared to break the conventional stereotype. However the conventional influence does not die easily. The extra constitutional methods of governance of village persist behind the screen in spite of several legislations. Social changes in the desired direction take place very gradually and it is hoped that constitutional amendment and state legislations speed up the process of social change.