Chapter-II

STATUS OF CLASSES
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The social set up of Tamilians was organised around caste segregation, economic disparities and religious anomalies. Based upon varna system, the Aryans divided the society into four castes viz, the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. With the advent of the Aryans into South India, the already existing indigenous divisions and subdivisions based upon occupation of the society, came to be amalgamated into these four fold divisions. Yet this Aryan system did not completely overcome the existing class structure in the Tamil region. With the passage of time, the four fold system which mingled with the social divisions of the Tamilians came to be re-classified into three primary divisions viz., the Brahmins, the caste-Hindus and the depressed classes. The caste-Hindus and the depressed classes were named as non-Brahmins.

The Brahmins

The Brahmins, who were in the upper strata of the society, occupied an eminent position in the Tamil society. The Brahmins were only two per cent of the Tamil population and resided at places known as agraharam. They were noted for religious orthodoxy and social supremacy. They were divided into a number of endogamous groups and were not evenly settled in Tamil Nadu. Nearly half of the Tamil Brahmins lived mostly in the three districts of Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Tirunelveli. Thanjavur was considered to be the citadel of Brahmin community. About nine per cent of the total population of Thanjavur were Brahmins.\(^1\) In Tamil Nadu, there

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were two broad categories of Brahmins, namely, Iyers and Iyengars. Among the occupational Tamil Brahmins, there were Vedic Brahmins, domestic Brahmins and temple priests. The temple priests played a vital role in the society. They regulated religious life and mingled with the people in the day to day activities.³

The reorganisation of the administrative system in the nineteenth century gave a lot of opportunities to the Brahmins to improve their standard of life. They became the elite administrative group in the Tamil society. Due to their economic and political status, they acquired landed property.⁴ In course of time, they occupied a dominant and privileged position in the social set up. They led a luxurious and convenient life at home while the other caste people were tilling the soil or engaged in trade activities. The Brahmins gave their lands to the non-Brahmin tenants for lease and they also cultivated the lands with the help of the labourers.⁵ Thus the Brahmins obtained income from the landed property and temple assets.

The Brahmins, who occupied a good and respectful position in the society, helped their children to get quality education. As a result, they could get postings in the administration and their exodus to towns started.⁶ Further, as they were considered an elite class, they were involved in political activities and greatly influenced the masses. All socio-politico and religious activities were dominated by the Brahmins which were responsible for the aggravation of the caste system in Tamil Nadu.⁷ The

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growth of anti-Brahminism compelled the Brahmins to seek anonymity, which only large and amorphous metropolitan crowds could provide.

The Caste-Hindus

The caste-Hindus were placed next to the Brahmins in the social stratification. Among them, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettiars, Naidus, Naicks and Kammalas gained great influence over the society. They were called non-Brahmin, caste-Hindus. The Vellala was a highly respected and influential caste among the non-Brahmin, caste-Hindus. There are several categories of the Vellalas, such as Tondaimandalam Vellalas (Saiva Vellalas), Karkarta Vellalas, Nanchinadu Vellalas, Kongu Vellalas etc. Invariably, they were land owners and cultivators.

Mudaliars are another example of the Indian penchant for diversity in unity. There are Arcot Mudaliars, Vellore Mudaliars, Poonamallee Mudaliars and Senguntha Mudaliars. They were all grouped under the generic name of Vellala at one time or another. In Tamil country, Vellala was the common name for people who were engaged in agriculture. They were next to Brahmins in hierarchical terms, though the Arcot Mudaliars considered themselves decidedly superior to Brahmins, probably because they distinguished themselves in education and they were generally anglophilic. It was a location (Vellore) or occupation (Senguntha-Silk weaving) that was responsible for the sub-division in course of time.

Mudaliar is a term that means the first-rank person, the leader, the chief. This community is not intimidated by the airs of those above or the assertions of those below. But they are subject to the same influences that impinge on all communities in India. The Thondaimandala Mudaliars belonged to Thondainadu, also known as Thondaimandalam

and Kancheepuram was its capital city. The Ekambareswarar Temple was the principal place of worship for the Thondimandalam Mudaliars. The story began with Karikala Chola clearing the dense forest area around Kancheepuram and settled there about 48,000 Vellala families from the present Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and South Arcot regions.

The Mudaliars were highly cultured and staunch saivaites. One group among them tilled the fields with the sweat of their labour. Another group employed labour to work the lands owned by them. They were also given to intellectual pursuits. Saints, spiritualists, chieftains, administrators and thinkers also rose from their ranks. The social transformation that took place in this community over the years can be witnessed at the life histories of the outstanding figures it has produced.

The spiritual scholar Sekkizhar, the author of Periyapuranam (a biographical account of sixty-three Saivaite Nayanmars) was born at Kunrathur in Puliyurkottam of Thondimandalam. He was also named Arulmozhi. What Arulmozhi Sekkizhar was in the world of scholarship, Ariyanatha Mudaliar was in the field of martial arts, strategy and tactics. Considered the patriarch of Thondaimandala Mudaliars, he was the Thalavai (Commander-in-Chief and Prime Minister) of four consecutive Nayak Kings. An area at Sholavandan called Mudaliar fort was constructed by him and 300 families of Thondaimandalam were settled there. He was responsible for the construction of the "Thousand Pillared Hall" at the Madurai Sri Meenakshi Temple.

In the nineteenth century, Vellagal Subramania Mudaliar was gifted with the ability to compose poetry in English and Tamil. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* Book I, was translated by him, using “Viruthappa” metre. When the Justice Party was formed in 1917, a number of Mudaliars joined in it. When the party took power in Madras, P.T.Rajan from the Mudaliar ranks became a minister. He also
S. Muthaiah Mudaliar was responsible for the first Communal Government Order which provided reservation and employment in Government. Viduthalai S. Gurusamy, was next in rank to Periyar* E.V. Ramaswamy in the Self Respect Movement. He was a well-known editor of "Viduthalai" newspaper, who worked incessantly to remove the cobwebs of superstition in Tamil Nadu. K. Bala Dandayutham, a Mudaliar, was a prominent member of the Communist Party of India in the mid 1900s. He was editor in charge of "Janasakthi" and "Thozhilarasu", papers run by the party. M. Bhaktavatsalam Mudaliar, another stalwart of the community, was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and a cabinet minister of the state for a long period. O.V. Alagesan, who belonged to the Congress Party, was the Deputy Railway Minister in the Jawaharlal Nehru Cabinet. Thondaimandal Mudaliar's service in the field of education was outstanding due to several distinguished educationists like the twin brothers, Arcot Ramasamy Mudaliar and Lakshmamasamy Mudaliar, N.D. Sundaravadivelu, T. Muthian, Shanmugam, and T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, who endeavoured to popularise Tamil literature. He was a torch – bearer of Tamil cultural renaissance. In the twentieth century, Thondaimadala, Mudaliars are included in the list of forward communities.

'Vellala', this word in Tamil, denotes 'cultivator'. Simultaneously it also denotes a major caste spread out in all the areas of the Tamil country like Tondaimandalam, Cholamandalam, Kongu Mandalam and

* On 13th November 1938 at the Tamil Women Conference held at Chennai under the leadership of Neelambigai Ammal, the title Periyar was conferred to E.V. Ramaswami Naicker recognising his social service to all especially to women.

Pandya Mandalam. They were subdivided on territorial basis and then further divided into numerous sub-castes. The outstanding feature of this caste is that the members are large-scale landowners and cultivators whose ownership goes several centuries back in time. Historically, the Vellalas were linked to a group of chieftains and petty fiefs called Velirs, the earliest literary references to whom are found in the Sangam anthologies. Since the beginning of the Christian era upto the Muhammadan invasion in the fourteenth century A.D, the Velirs played roles of varying importance.

Even though the centralised political power in Tamil country weakened from the fourteenth century, due to alien invasions, the aliens associated themselves with the indigenous elite groups – the Vellalas. The seventeenth century mandala satakam poems (5 or 7 of which are devoted to extolling the past glories of Vellalas) are interpreted as “ideological statements of an ancient and continuing, though challenged, dominance of Tamil Vellalas”. A series of inscriptions at Vikramasingapuram, Courtallam, Kanyakumari etc., point to yet another Vellala family associated with the Government in Tirunelveli principality. Vadomalaiyappa Pillaiyan, a Karkarta Vellala from Kayanur in Madurai district is mentioned as Karyattu-k-Kartar (agent for administration) to Tirumal Nayak. His functions include collection of revenue and maintenance of law and order. Renovation and construction of temples at Tentirupperai, Tirukkolur, Sankarankoil, Kanyakumari,

Tiruchendur and Courtallam are attributed to him. His son Tirumalai-k-Kolundu Pillai, was Karyattu-k-Kartar for Chokkanatha Nayak.

The “Vellalas-as-administration” motif recurs often in the family and estate histories of the numerous Palayappattus and Zamins in Chokkampatti, Sivagangai, Ettaiyapuram, Panjalamkurichi, Ramanathapuram etc. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Vellalas were considered a powerful local caste equal to the Maravas. The Maravas were a warrior caste who were generally not interested in agriculture or trade. Their economic base was smaller vis-à-vis the Vellalas who had a high ritual status as well. The Maravas and Vellalas were not direct competitors for the same kinds of power. Moreover, in the hostilities between Telugu and Marava Poligars, Vellalas were uniformly sought after by both blocs for key ministerial assignments. Thus, the Vellalas played a dominant role in various periods at various levels. The Saiva Vellalas known for vegetarianism occupied a decent place in the society. They had good education and entered the government jobs in various categories. Besides they were engaged in ploughing operation which fetched them a considerable income from agriculture and increased their economic and social status on par with the Brahmins. They established their individuality and identity in their social ceremonies by not inviting the Brahmins, the usual practice of other caste people. The other


Vellalas lived throughout Tamil Nadu but they were not maintaining the status equal to that of Saiva Vellalas in the society.\textsuperscript{16}

The Chettiar\textsc{es} or Chettis, next to the Vellala caste, were involved in trade and commercial activities. There were numerous sub-divisions of whom the most significant and influential groups were Nattukottai Chettis, Beri Chettis, Komutti Chettis and Vaniya Chettis.\textsuperscript{17} The Nattukottai Chettis were the most enterprising commercial community of Tamil Nadu. They were mostly traders and money lenders. They are known for pious and charitable activities. They contributed a considerable share of their income to the endowments of various temples. The Beri Chettis came on the scene later than the Nattukottai Chettis. They also claim themselves to be vaisyas and are living in Kumbakonam region. They are both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Komutti Chettis, known as a mercantile class, settled mostly in Salem, Coimbatore and Madurai.\textsuperscript{18} The Vaniya Chettis, the popular traders in oil, used to carry on business in oil seeds. They pressed the oil seeds and produced varieties of oil. They made a remarkable contribution to the commercial prosperity, besides the agricultural occupation. They were well-known for their frugality.\textsuperscript{19}

The artisan castes were a homogenous group constituting not less than one tenth of the total population.\textsuperscript{20} They were called Kammalas and Visvakarmas, supposed to be descended from Visvakarma, the architect among gods. They believe that they are superior even to Brahmins. They

\textsuperscript{16} Pillay, K.K., \textit{Studies in Indian History}, pp.325 – 327.
\textsuperscript{20} G.O. No. 970 – 971, Public Department, 20 July 1897.
also call themselves as Acharis and Pattars and they claim knowledge of the Vedas.\textsuperscript{21} The Kammalas are well organised and practised vegetarian habits. The five divisions among them are goldsmith (Tattan), brassmith (kannan), carpenter (tachchan), stonemason (kal tachchan) and blacksmith (kollan or karuman). They are called Panchalar.\textsuperscript{22} The goldsmiths do not practise intermarriage with the kollan or karuman whereas the rest of the others do. They wear the holy thread and call themselves Vishwa Brahmins. They maintain a higher place in the social scale but they are scattered throughout Tamil Nadu in meager strength and their services are highly indispensable and useful to the society.

Thus the non-Brahmin, caste-Hindu community rendered a significant role not only in the agrarian activities but also in commercial and artisan works. Each caste enjoyed a greater measure of unity than the non-Brahmin, caste-Hindus as a whole, although most of the major ones are themselves sub-divided. In fact, there are a lot of socio-economic disparities within each but they sank their differences when they began to resist the monopoly of Brahmins in all spheres.\textsuperscript{23} The non-Brahmin caste-Hindus were numerically stronger than the Brahmins but lagged behind Brahmins in the race for prosperity, power, and wealth. In 1871, it was also proved in the Census Report that the government jobs were monopolised by the Brahmins.\textsuperscript{24} Further, it was noted that no non-Brahmin caste-Hindu was elected to the Legislative council of Madras from 1882 to 1917.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Veeramani, K., and Kuppusamy, R.P., \textit{According to Law We are Still Sudras – But How?}, Madras, 1989, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{22} The Modern Rationalist, (monthly), Madras, June 1992, p.25.
\textsuperscript{24} Veeramani, K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.4.
\textsuperscript{25} Venugopal, P., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.9 -10.
Backward and Scheduled People

Among the non-Brahmins in general, the backward and scheduled castes were numerically strong. The former consists of Nadars, Vanniars, Thevars etc., and they enjoyed better status and privileges than the Adi-Dravidas. The Nadars are settled mostly in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts. Nadars were considered inferior to other backward class people. Their main occupation was toddy tapping, Palmyra cultivation and sale of goods produced from the Palmyra tree.

At early days the Nadars were called Shanars who cultivated and climbed the Palmyra palm tree from which they drew the sweet juice which they turned into coarse country sugar to eke out a living. Caldwell described them thus: “as belonging to the highest division of the lowest classes or the lowest of the middle classes”. They were in a social limbo between the Sudras and the outcaste untouchables. On the representation of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam, which was formed in 1910 for the welfare of this caste, the Government of Madras chose to recognize them as Nadars instead of Shanars and issued an order to that effect in July 1921.

They were considered a ‘half-polluting’ caste and though free from some of the restrictions placed on the lower classes, they had to keep spatial distance from the high castes. They were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to use foot-wear or carry water-pots on their hips. They

30. G.O.No. 785, Law (General) Department, 7 July 1921.
could not milk cows or use balances to weigh tobacco and other articles. They could not build houses above one story nor tile them. Their women were not allowed to use fine jewellery. To mark their degradation, the women were forbidden to wear anything whatever above their waist but had to go about clad in a piece of coarse cloth called ‘mundu’, stretching from waist to knees exposing their breasts. Several other very ordinary conveniences and comforts were denied to them.\(^\text{31}\)

Further the government harassed them by the extraction of several unjust burden including taxes and levies. The most oppressive of these taxes was the Talai Irai or poll-tax levied on all male members of a family, living or dead. When some of the families migrated to the neighboring districts to avoid this tax, the relatives of these families were forced to pay the tax on their behalf. The Nadar community suffered more than the others on account of the poll-tax. The government also extracted taxes from the palm trees from which they drew the sweet juice for their meager existence.\(^\text{32}\) There were numerous other taxes like Irari-Panam and Velai padivu. The feudal chieftains extracted from their lower caste tenants whom they could evict at will or even kill. Their using of head-gear, umbrellas with handles and the growing of moustache needed specific permission on payment of a prescribed fee.\(^\text{33}\) “There was a tax for the hair one grew and for the breasts of the woman called a breast-tax”.\(^\text{34}\) The Nadar women were not allowed to wear jackets to cover upper part of their body.

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The inhuman manner in which these taxes were extracted made the tax collector a terror to the Nadars. The concessions made from time to time by benign rulers were often overlooked and physical torture was applied to extract not merely dues but even advances; sometimes far above the fixed rates. Short fire-locks were fixed on the ears of the ‘offending’ men who had to stand with them for hours in the hot sun suffering excruciating pain till the tax was paid. In the absence of the men, the women were tortured by heavy wooden rice-pestles being twisted into their hair or by making them stand in a bent position with heavy stones placed on their backs. 35

Socially degraded and economically exploited, Nadars lived in a state of fear, humiliated and despised until the middle of the nineteenth century when social and economic reforms of far-reaching results were introduced due to the influence of the British who had come to play a vital role in shaping the affairs of the Nadars.

As a result, they could not tolerate this inhuman practice of the higher caste people which made the Nadars to fight against social discrimination and to turn towards Christian missionaries in order to get social status and privileges in the society. Thus, the religious conversion took place in large scale in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu and they started studying western education and style in life. 36 The remaining Hindu Nadars took up trade as lucrative occupation. By nature, both Christian and Hindu Nadars were hard working, business minded and highly reliable. With the help of these qualities, they captured a covetable place in the social ladder. In the beginning of the

35. Agur, C.M., op.cit, p.164.
twentieth century, they were generally considered as an affluent business community. 

Next to Nadars of the backward class of Tamil Nadu, the Kallars, the Maravas and the Agamudayars collectively known as ‘Thevars’ and ‘Mukkulathors’ belonged to a warrior group. The names of the three communities, reflect occupational characteristics. Kallars are professional soldiers turned robbers; Maravars are warriors and soldiers while Agamudayars are largely cultivating castes. The Kallars were known for mortality and ferocious nature. They were divided into many sub-castes, known as Esenattu Kallars, or Terkattiyar, in Thanjavur, Nattu Kallars in Ramanathapuram district and Visanganattu Kallars in Tiruchirappalli district. This illustrates the fact that they are spread over the districts of Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram, Tiruchirappalli, Pudukkottai, Madurai and Thanjavur.

The Maravas were either soldiers in the Poligar’s armies or Kavalkars (watch and ward) in both circar and Zamin. They were in control of the judicial administration too. This responsibility was particularly vested with the Maravas in the southern districts of Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli and Madurai and with the Kallars in the areas north of Madurai and south of Tiruchirappalli. According to this system, the Kavalkar duty was to protect the property, to see that there was no theft of food grains, and maintenance of law and order for the smooth functioning of the village system. When the Madras Presidency was formed, the British found that the Kaval Chiefs had assumed all

38. Go. No. 2233, Judicial Department, 10 September 1915.
powers and were running parallel governments, depriving the authorities of powers. After prolonged consideration, the Kaval system was abolished by the British administrators. But actual stoppage could not be implemented.

In 1894, in the Dindigul area the first challenge was thrown to the Kallars by one Ammayappa Kone, a village munissif of Usilampatty, to Karuppa Thevar, the Kaval Chief of that area. The Kallars of 40 villages united together. For this purpose, a fund was created. For the first time, the Kallars had to contribute a little to safeguard their interests. To safeguard and develop the language, one Pandithurai Thevar established the Tamil Sangam on May 24, 1901. The objectives of the Tamil Sangam was to revive the glory of Tamil. He said that the revival of the Pandya legacy was the duty of the Mukkulathors.

In 1911, the Kallars of Thanjavur under the leadership of Uma Maheswara Pillai established the Karanthai Tamil Sangam, with the financial assistance of the Kallars around. The Thanjavur Kallars were interested in social reform for their community. They started a Sangam called ‘Indirakula Athipar’ and a journal called ‘Kallar Koman’ around 1914. At Nanguneri there was a society registered as ‘Maravar Sangam’. The Maravas of some influence in the Nanguneri Taluk are called Aru-Pangu Nattu Maravas i.e. belonging to six villages. Most of them depended on Kaval fees for their livelihood. As Kaval fee ran into problems, a section of the Maravars of Nanguneri Taluk took up evil

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ways of living by committing crimes. They were declared a criminal tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act in 1919. Hence, some respectable Maravas had decided in 1927 to reclaim the deviant Maravas in the community and to uplift the community as a whole by imparting proper education to the younger generation and to make the Maravars responsible members of the society. This was followed by the 'Maravar Sangam' on June 6, 1929 by the Raja of Ramanathapuram. The objective of this Sangam was the development of Maravas. The Madras Presidency Agamudyar Sangam was started by Sathiah Servai on January 17, 1932, with the objective of service to Agamudayars.

The Sangam thus established in 1932 by R.M. Rackappa Thevar, (Rajapalayam Maravar Sangam) was functioning in an orderly way. On the same model, Usilampatti Piramalai Kallar Youth Sangam functioned from 1932. A meeting of the few important people was convened at Madras by Muthiah Thevar, a businessman during May, 1933. Many important persons including the Crown Prince of Ramanathapuram, Rajaram Pandian, met and started the All India Mukkulathor Sangam on January 22, 1934. In the first meeting, they passed a resolution that the three communities must have inter-marriages. They also resolved to operate branch offices in all centers dominated by them, such as Rajapalayam, Srivilliputhur, Usilampatti, Periyakulam, Uthamapalayam, etc. The objective of this organization was ethnic identity. One Sivanadi Servai played a major role in this movement.

The Vanniyars were once treated as a lowest caste in the Varna. They settled mostly in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, and in

Pondicherry. Vanniyar is a generic name for a large number of castes. They formed twenty one per cent in Chengleput, twenty six per cent in North Arcot, thirty three per cent in South Arcot, nine per cent in Tiruchirappalli and twenty-four per cent in Salem. 46 A Tamil proverb has it that Palli matures into Padayachi, Padyachi into Goundan and Goundan into Naicken. However, in their attempts at caste mobility, they forged a common identity and formed a horizontal stretch.

Their earliest attempt on social mobility was in 1833, when the Pallis in Pondicherry claimed that they were Vanniyar and not a low caste. The administration turned down their claim stating that the Hindu law did not refer to the Vanniyar at all. 47 Their subsequent attempts were at least four-pronged. At first, during the 1871 census, representatives of the caste petitioned the government for classifying them as Kshatriyas. The census superintendent listed the Vanniyars as one of the many Shudra castes in the south. Secondly, the Vanniyars claim their social status by citing various works. In 1872, Munusami Pillai’s Jathi Sankragaram showed that the Pallis of the south were descendants of the fire races (Agnikulas) of the Kshatriyas, and the Tamil Pallis were at one time the Shepherd Kings of Egypt. In 1891, T.Aiyakannu Nayakar’s Vannikula Vilakkam, claimed the Vanniyars as Kshatriyas and in 1907, T. Varadappa Nayakar’s Varna Dharpanam connected the Vanniya caste with the ancient Pallava Kings. 48

Thirdly, the Vanniyars formed their caste associations. The Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam (VKKMS), founded in Madras in 1888, was a high watermark in Vanniyar's mobility attempts. Among other things, it helped to create a strong 'esprit de corps' among members of the caste in various parts of the Presidency, and this mobilization was instrumental in the establishment of schools, chattrams (choultries), and the publication of a newspaper, Agnikuladittan (the Sun of Agnikulam) since 1908.

Fourthly, they worked for better self-perception. The Gazetteer of the South Arcot district noted that they were “tending gradually to approach the Brahminical standard of social conduct. This meant that they discouraged adult marriage, meat eating, widow remarriage, and also actively repressed open immorality or other social sins. In 1903, the representatives of the caste in thirty-four villages in South Arcot district had bound themselves in writing under penalty of excommunication, to refrain from the practice of marrying two wives, and of allowing a woman to marry again during the lifetime of her first husband. Some of the caste members took to calling themselves Vanniyakula Kshatriayas or Agnikula Kshatriyas, and others even declared that they were Brahmins. They even wore the sacred thread, tied their clothes in the Brahminical fashion and became vegetarians. In this connection, M.A. Manickavelu Naicker was the first Vanniyar who got an opportunity to pass a resolution in the Madras Legislative Council in 1931, recommending to the Labour Department to improve Vanniyar condition. Responding to the Vanniyars’ demands,

49. Daily Voice, (Fortnightly), Bangalore, 1 September 1989.
50. Radhakrishnan, P., loc. it, p.15.
the census eventually dubbed them as “Vanniyan (Vanniyakula Kshatria)” in 1931. Their Movement from 1915 to 1927 was against Brahmin dominance in education and employment. Later, it involved itself in the backward class movement from 1927 to 1947 and struggled against forward non-Brahmin castes. In 1947, as a result of the Vanniyars’ assiduous campaign, the government offered them a small share in government employment.\(^{52}\)

The depressed class people occupied the lowest rank in the social ladder. They were labourers in agriculture and other public works.\(^{53}\) They were called by different names as Panchamas, Untouchables, Adi-Dravidas and the Fifth Varna. Since 1922, they have been officially called Adi-Dravidas. In 1933, Gandhi called them Harijans.\(^{54}\) The term, Scheduled Caste, was first used by the Simon Commission.\(^{55}\) They were so called partly because of racial and partly of religious considerations and partly as a matter of custom.\(^{56}\)

The Adi-Dravidas consisted of nine endogamous castes known as Koravas, Chakkiliyas, Kuluvas, Valluvas, Madigas, Malas, Pallas, Parayas and Semmas. Numerically they were around 86,00,000\(^{57}\) and formed one fifth of the total population of the Madras Presidency. They inhabited all districts of Tamil Nadu. Among them, the Pallas\(^{58}\) and Parayas were notable labourers who resided in every village. The Pallars

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constitute 21 per cent of the Dalit population in Tamil Nadu while other groups such as Parayas and Chakiliyas account for 59 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. The Pallas are 'Mountain People' who settled in Plains. David Ludden remarked that the primitive Palla cultivators preferred subservient status in irrigated villages to their precarious independence in the hills. S.R. Lushington, the first Collector of Tirunelveli, found them enterprising and noted their anxiety in getting early emancipation: "Despite the scanty means of subsistence, the Pallas in their eagerness to obtain relief from affliction in bondage, usually contracted their wants to the mere preservation of their lives with an exception that the accumulation of their savings might enable them to purchase freedom at not a distant future.”

The Pallas and Pariahs were found working in the muddy paddy fields and living in segregated neighborhoods as untouchable outcastes, when the British conducted land survey toward the close of the eighteenth century. Pallas were agricultural serfs of landlords of the dominant castes until 1843, the year in which serfdom was abolished in India. In Thanjavur, they were attached to Brahmin households and in Tirunelveli to Vellalar landholdings. A Palla could opt for any other work. A runaway Palla could always be coerced to return to his master. The Palla agricultural serfs received their daily wages in grain and gifts on special occasions. Their work was also more arduous, for men and women performed practically the whole work of grain cultivation of a village. The compiler of Tanjore District Gazetteer recorded the

60. David Ludden, Peasant History in South India, Delhi, 1989, p.1.
condition of the Pallas at the beginning of the twentieth century thus: ‘Now, as then, the Pannaiyal (i.e. the debt due by him) is usually paid in grain and not in money; he was given presents on festive occasions and was often in debt beyond recall to his landowner. Moreover, when an estate is sold, the ‘right’ of the landowner over the Pannaiyal was often also transferred in the document which transfers the ownership of the land’.  

The life of depressed class was one of ignorance, misery and servitude. The daily life and living conditions of the depressed classes were extremely pathetic. The cheri or slum, the living place of the depressed class, was in the outskirts, a considerable distance from the habitation places of the upper castes and it did not have even the basic facilities and amenities. Like aborigines and animals, they led their lives under unhygienic conditions.

The use of public wells, tanks and roads was prohibited to the depressed classes. They had to draw drinking water from stinking, muddy, unhygienic pools. They were not permitted to oil or comb their hair. The village barbers’ services were denied to depressed classes. They had to dress themselves only in rags. They were prohibited from christening their children with names commonly used by the higher castes. They were forbidden to take up any profession or occupation other than scavenging and other menial tasks.

The principle of untouchability was carried too far in the observance of what was known as distance pollution. J.H. Hutton

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64. Festschrift Committee Prof. G. Thangavelu, op.cit, p.3.
observed that several caste-Hindus were regarded as polluted by the proximity of the members of the depressed classes and so were not allowed to approach Hindu temples. Among the caste-Hindus, the Brahmans alone, who belonged to the priestly class, were permitted to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The people belonging to the next lower rung viz., Vellalas, Mudaliars and others were allowed to approach the steps in front of the garbhagraham for devotional acts like reciting Vedic mantras and prostrating in front of the deities. When the deity was in procession during the brahmotsava (the grand annual festival), they were asked to stand 100 cubits* away from the idol of the deity. Violations were considered to be serious. To ward off such an evil, fresh consecration was required for purification.  

Thus the ranking of the various castes had divine sanction even in the temple. From there, it was also practised in the social mobility and movements of the people. The Nadars were considered to contaminate a Brahmin if they approached the latter within twenty four paces, a Tiyan within thirty six paces and Pulayan within ninety six paces. C.A. Innes and K. Madhava Menon have observed that artisans must keep a distance of twenty four feet from a Brahmin while a ‘Nayadi’ must keep seventy four feet away. In some cases, this distance shrank to about four or five feet. In some other cases, mere sight was enough to cause pollution. Thus, the pollution concepts, purity and distance, gave birth to the ideas of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability.

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* Cubit is the name for any one of many units of measure used by various ancient peoples. This is about 45 cm or 18 inch.

The European Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the upliftment of the depressed people. Though they were interested in evangelisation, they attacked the superstitious beliefs and the caste atrocities of those days. They created a new awareness among the outcaste groups. The issue of parity of caste raised by them caught the imagination of "Polluting Castes" of South Tamil Nadu. The Pallas began to convert to Christianity, which promised self-respect to all outcastes in Tamil society. Successive famines that broke out in Tamil Nadu from 1876 also drove the Pallas, as an economically vulnerable group, into the fold of Christianity because only the church had organised famine relief camps and charity homes to feed the hungry. The Pallas invariably took to Catholicism or Lutheranism as these two denominations particularly empathised with the subaltern groups.69