CHAPTER II

CONDITION OF AGASTEESWARAM TALUK ON THE EVE OF THE ENTRY OF CHRISTIANITY

Agasteeswaram taluk formed the southern most part of Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. It is bounded on the north and north-east by Thovalai taluk on the east and south-east by a chain of hills which separate it from the Tirunelveli district, on the south-west by the sea and on the west by the Kalkulam taluk.\(^1\) It is situated at the southern extremity of India between 8°4' Northern Latitude and 77°36' Eastern Longitude.\(^2\) The total area of this taluk is 143.53 sq.km.\(^3\) The total population of this taluk, as revealed by the Census of 2001 is 11,5188, 56,778 males and 58,410 females.\(^4\)

The mean annual rainfall is 36-4".\(^5\) It has a warm humid climate, with no cold season. The summer season is particularly

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\(^4\) Ibid.
oppressive. The summer from March to May is followed by the south-west monsoon season from June to September. October and November constitute the post-monsoon and from December to February is the north-east monsoon although the rains are confined to the first half of the season and the rest of the period is one of the clear bright weather generally.\(^6\) There are no hills except the Maruthuva Mala (Medicine hill) which is noted for the numerous medicinal herbs which grow there.\(^7\) Maruthuva Mala attracts spiritualists seeking solace in solitude.

This is one of the most fertile and populous taluks. The Vadaseri river, also called Palayar, flows through the taluks of Thovalai and Agasteeswaram in a south-easterly direction and falls into the Manakudi lake after a course of 23 miles, passing through the towns of Bhuthapandi, Kottar, Nagercoil, Thazhakudi and Suchindram. This river is very useful for irrigation.\(^8\) Before the completion of Kothayar Irrigation Project the sources of water supply to this taluk were the Palayar, the Puthanar and the Ananthanar canal.

It is purely agricultural and its economy solely depends on agricultural production. Paddy is the most important food crop of this

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\(^8\) Velupillai, T.K., *op.cit.*, Vol.I, 1940, p.64.
taluk. The vast expanses of paddy fields known as ‘Sivindapparru’ to the west “Terapparru” to the north, ‘Kilapparru’, and Nallapparru’ to the east and the Kakkamar’, ‘Kuricci’ and ‘Parakkaiparru’ to the South of Sucindram present the most coveted and highly priced paddy lands of Nanchilnadu. Rice is the staple food of the rich and the poor alike. The chief industries of this area are handloom weaving, mat making, pottery and brass work.10

There lies a network of tanks and ponds, serving as reservoirs. The ‘Sivindakulam’, and the ‘Vetkaikkulam’ the ‘Parakkaikulam’ and the ‘Terkkulam’ are the biggest tanks and between them they irrigate over two thousand areas of paddy fields.11 Coconut groves abound in various parts of this taluk. Palmyrah also flourishes in abundance. Nature is seen in her lavish beauty. The vast expanse of paddy fields, the wavy coconut and palmyrah groves, the mango, tamarind, laurel, plantain and margos trees in between the inhabited quarter the tanks and ponds, the river and its channels and above all the delightful flower gardens in the different parts of the taluk present a fascinating appearance. Sir M.E. Grant Duff, a former Governor of Madras described it “as one of the fairest and most interesting realms that Asia to show”. Another

Governor of Madras, Lord Connemara compared it to Italy and called it a fairy land and is typical of this picturesque country.\textsuperscript{12}

From the literature and inscriptions one can find that this taluk comprised ancient territorial units of Tamil Nadu known as Nanchil Nadu and Venadu. The word Venadu is derived from the words Vel and Nadu. Vel and Aay refer to the same people. It is very clear from that Vel was the family name of the Aays, Purananur mentions that Aay owns Pothiyamalai.\textsuperscript{13}

There is the tradition embodied in the so-called Lemurian theory, which maintains that there lay a large mass of land to the south of Cape Comorin, later swallowed up by the sea.\textsuperscript{14} It is said that Lemuria was the cradle of the human race. This continent got the name from the characteristic feature of the animal ‘Lemur’\textsuperscript{15} once found in it. The present Agasteeswaram taluk then formed a part of this Lemuria. The Paraliyaru now known as Palayaaru in this taluk is none other than the “Pahrali” river of the disappeared Lemuria.\textsuperscript{16} Shenbagaraman Pallu and Nanjil Venba corroborate the view.\textsuperscript{17} From the poetic inscription found in the Pandyan

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{12} Ibid.
\bibitem{14} Pillay, K.K., \textit{The Suciindram Temple}, p.14.
\bibitem{15} Lemurs look like monkeys but have fox faces. The thump and the great toe are well developed and opposable. The fore fingers and the second toe end in sharp claw instead of a flat nail as the other fingers and toes. The tail is absent in Indian forms. It is said that approximately 185 lakhs years ago the Lemur lived in South India, Madagashkar and Africa.
\bibitem{17} நூற்றுணக்கும் சுமாரும் தென் கிளியம் காலத்தில் – வேயாண ஊக்கையில் நீர்த்தட்டு.
\end{thebibliography}
Dam on the river Palayaaru, the dam is mentioned as Paraliyatru Anai.\textsuperscript{18} After the construction of the dam near Bhuthapaandi in the Kollam year 920 (1745 A.D) the new branch of the river has been called ‘Puthanaaru’ and the old river came to be known as Palayaaru.\textsuperscript{19}

If the Lemurian theory is true and if the Sangams of the Tamils were actually held in the lost continent of Lemuria certainly the history of the Tamils should commence from the Agasteeswaram taluk. There is literary evidence to show that the first and second Tamil Sangams were held at south Madurai and Kapadapuram respectively in the lost continent of Lemuria. Among the 549 scholars in the first Sangam Agasthiyar was prominent.\textsuperscript{20} In the Ramayana of Valmiki occurs a reference to the Malaya mountain otherwise known as Pothigai hill as the seat of Agasthiyar. Even today Agasteeswaram taluk is known after his name. The names Agasthiyar, Agasteeswaram and Agasthialingam are very common areas of this taluk and even the ladies bear the name Agasthi. It is also an important fact that Tholkappiar is considered to be the chief disciple of Agasthiyar and belonged to Vilavancode taluk.\textsuperscript{21} It is very near to Agasteeswaram taluk.

It is also a wonder to hear the fact that Tiruvalluvar was born in Thirunayanaarkurichi. Valluvanadu was adjacent to Nanchil Nadu and it

\textsuperscript{18} Pillay, K.K., \textit{A Social History of the Tamils}, Madras, 1975, p.487.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Travancore Land Revenue Manual}, Vol.IV, p.98.
\textsuperscript{20} Sami Chidambaranar, \textit{Tolkappia Tamizhar} (Tamil), Chennai, 2002, p.3.
was ruled by a chieftain Valluvan who happened to be a poet of genius. One of the inscriptions belonging to the 18th year of the Chola King Raja Raja I found in the rock-cut cave temple at Tirunandikkarai records, the gift of the village of Muttam in Valluvanaadu to the Tirunandikkarai and the name of the village has been altered to Mummudi Cholanallur. In all probability Tirunaayanaarkurichi near this taluk which was in Valluvanaadu was the birth place of Tiruvalluvar. There is also a firm tradition that Avvaiyar the reputed poetess of the Sangam period belongs to Nanchil Nadu. Unlike in other parts of Tamil Nadu there are three shrines of Avvaiyar in Kanyakumari district. In Purananuru Avvaiyar gives a fine description of Nanchilnadu. She had arranged a marriage near Aralvaimozhi, for which she invited the sovereign of the Chera, Chola and Pandya Kingdoms. Three separate pandals were erected there and this event led to the place being called Muppandal.

Kurathiyarai near Alagiapandipuram has a rock-cut cave temple locally called Avvaiaaramman koil. In the inscription and palm leaf records Alagiapandipuram is mentioned as Adiganur. There is another shrine dedicated to Avvai is enshrined under a Nelli tree and is hence

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24 Puram-140.
25 Aralvaimozhi is about 15 km from Nagercoil. The name of the place is said to be derived from the Tamil words Aralvai meaning a way in the midst of a Chain of Mountains in otherwords a Pass in the Ghats. The conquerors, plunders and the early missionaries entered into the rich plain of Nanchil Nadu through Aralvaimozhi.
known as Nelliyadi Avvai. The belief is that it was here that the immortal poetess left this mortal world.\textsuperscript{27} Even if they are proved to contain an element of truth, it seems that only the low lands very near the coast could have been under the sea at one time. It seems that during the later period of Aay, their rule extended over Nanchilnadu. Further the name ‘Idarayakkudi’ the earlier name of Idalakudy, a suburb of Kottar, suggests its association with the Aay.\textsuperscript{28}

The Pandyas were always in contact with Nanchil Nadu. The early inscription again refers to the place as included in Nanchil Nadu which undoubtedly formed a part of the Pandya Empire. The Goddess Kumari was in fact revered as the family deity of the Pandya King.\textsuperscript{29} The 17\textsuperscript{th} century witnessed a period of trial and tribulation, of suffering and agony of the inhabitants of Nanchil Nadu. The regular invasion of Nanchil Nadu was first undertaken by Tirumala Nayak in 1634 A.D.\textsuperscript{30} The Mudaliar manuscripts recovered recently from the heir of the Periyavittu Mudaliar of Alagiapandipuram throw a flood of light on the Nayak invasion and the consequent suffering of the people. The modern era in the history of Nanchil Nadu may be said to have dawned with the epoch making reign of Bala Marthanda Varma. Kanyakumari District seceded

\textsuperscript{28} Pillay, K.K., The Sucindram Temple, p.17.
\textsuperscript{29} Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.III, p.48.
\textsuperscript{30} Pillay, K.K., The Sucindram Temple, p.44.
from Travancore to accede to the Madras State by the State Reorganisation Act of 1st November 1956.31

The important places of the taluk are Cape Comorin, Kottar, Nagercoil, Vadaseri, Mylaudi, Manakudi and Vattakottai. Cape Comorin is the land’s end of the Indian Peninsula, where the waters of the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal embrace one another in this cape. It is the only place in the entire world one can witness both rising and setting of the sun.32 This is a famous place of pilgrimage as well as a popular health resort during the summer. It occupies a unique place among the tourist centres of India. This place has been associated with great men like Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi, in whose names memorials have been built there.33

Kottar is also a part of this taluk. Its historical significance needs to be highlighted because it is now neglected and more or less forgotten. This town has been a flourishing centre of commerce from a very early past and Ptolemy (AD 150) mentions Kottiara as a metropolis with considerable trade.34 It is a principal market for the exchange in articles of trade and money in South India.35 Pandikovai, for example,

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33 Gopalakrishnan, M., op.cit., p.1174.
34 Emily Gilchriest Hatch, Travancore, Calcutta, 1939, p.237.
35 Lieutenants Word and Conner, op.cit., p.2.
describing the victories of Nedumaran, the Pandyan King, refers to the capture of Kottar in the following lines.

“கோட்டார் கௌரவமான கண்டல். கோட்டார் கௌரவமான கண்டல்.” \(^{36}\)

Kottar was inhabited by men and women of noble descent. It was a perfect city and presented a beautiful appearance. There were many bazaars in Kottar selling various goods. Even now the bazaars of Kottar are famous for trade and it is locally called Pandaka Salai and Koolakadai.\(^{37}\) In respect of internal trade Kottar appears to have gained a remarkable prominence from early times.\(^{38}\)

All types of music and musical instruments were popular in the city. The city containing charming dancers, craftsmen with artistic talents and clever magicians was a heaven to the visitors. Fr. Bartholemeu of the 18\(^{th}\) century who mentions that “… this city, of considerable trade, is upward of 2000 years old and much frequented by merchants from the island of Ceylon, the provinces of Madurai, Tanjore and the coast of Coromandal. It contains abundance of merchandise and is inhabited by a great number of weavers, money changers, silversmiths, jugglers, comedians, quacks, dancing girls, conjurers and black artists.\(^{39}\)

\(^{36}\) Pillay, K.K., A Social History of the Tamils, p.518.
\(^{38}\) Pillay, K.K., A Social History of the Tamils, p.568.
There is epigraphic and literary evidence to show that Kottar, the flourishing city of Nanchilnadu attracted almost all the dynasties of South India. In the words of Dr. K.K. Pillay "Commencing from the days of the early Pandyas, Kottar, the metropolis, became the cock-pit of the south." Kottar has served as a strategic base for the early rulers and it continues to be a dynamic centre of trade.

The largest town in this taluk is Nagercoil. Nagercoil derived its name from the Hindu temple called Nagar Amman Kovil which is situated in the heart of the town. Nagercoil is the selection grade municipal town administered by a municipal council. Nagercoil owes much of its present position and importance to the efforts of Christian Missionaries of the London Missionary Society. Many firsts such as the first English School, the first printing press and the first newspaper were due to the influence of the Missionaries. It is the most important distributing centre for the various goods that come from Tirunelveli, Kottar and Vadaseri which are within the Municipal limits. It has been a centre of trade and industry from very ancient times.

Vadaseri is noted for a public market which is one of the biggest in the State. It is a hamlet of Nagercoil and was called

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40 Pillay, K.K., *The Suciindram Temple*, p.263.
43 London Missionary Society hereafter referred to as L.M.S.
Adityavarma Chaturvedimangalam and the village owed that name perhaps to one of Adityavarman who reigned in 1375.\textsuperscript{46} It is growing in importance owing to the activities of the Salvation Army.\textsuperscript{47}

Mylaudi is about nine kilometres from Nagercoil on the Nagercoil-Anjugramam road. Iron ore was smelted until about 60 years ago. Blacksmiths purchased the smelted iron and made out of it agricultural tools and other implements, which were reported to be more durable than those made of imported materials.\textsuperscript{48} Bruce Foote writes then “The predominant character of the gnesis rocks in the quarter is that of well-bedded, massive, quartzo-felspathic granite gnesis with a very variable quantity of (generally black) mica and very numerous small red or pinkish granites. The availability of this type of gnesis in Mylaudi, Ittankad and Valukkamparai, all of which are villages in this taluk, has been immense use in the carving of excellent images and figures found in the various temples. The earliest Protestant Church in Travancore State was built here in 1810 by Rev. Ringeltaube. A famous public market is also seen here which attracts the residents of adjoining villages.\textsuperscript{49}

The manufacture of salt has been carried on successfully for ages in several factories at Thamaraikulam, Puthalam and Variyur near Manakudi lake which constitute the principal salt producing centres in this

\textsuperscript{46} Travancore Archaeological Series, Vol.V, Travancore, 1924, p.121.
\textsuperscript{48} Pillay, K.K., The Suchindram Temple, p.6.
\textsuperscript{49} Gopala Krishnan, M., op.cit., p.1191.
area, even in the present day. There is a village port at Manakudi, 7 kms to the west of Kanyakumari on the edge of Manakudi lake.\textsuperscript{50} The pans of Variyur were manufacturing salt earlier than the 11\textsuperscript{th} century A.D is learnt from an epigraph of Kulothunga Chola Deva I.\textsuperscript{51} It is noteworthy that the Variyur inscription of Kulotunga registers an endowment of two pans in the salt factory for the maintenance of a perpetual lamp in the Sucindram Temple.

That the pans in Manakudi were in existence as early as the time of Rajendra Chola (1012-1044 A.D) is evident from the description of the factory as Mahipala-Kula-Kala-pperalam\textsuperscript{52} is an inscription of Rajadhiraja deva found at Cape Comorin.

Vattakottai, a granite fort six kilometres north-east of Kanyakumari Cape, forms the terminal of a line of ramparts known as South Travancore lines built by Marthandavarma to serve as defence for Nanchil Nadu.\textsuperscript{53} This was part of the defence plan perfected by De Lannoy. During the reign of Marthanda Varma, the Great, the South Travancore lines extend from the fort across the country to Aramboly, the mountain pass. Some earth work defence lines were in existence before this reign, but these were strengthened and extended. Bastions were built at regular intervals and a fort gate at the pass. When Colonel St. Legar

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{52} It was one of the Surnames of Rajendra Chola.
\textsuperscript{53} Gopalakrishnan, M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.1224.
brought his forces through this part in 1810, a part of the lines was demolished. It was left intact, as it stands today, a silent witness to the life and labours of the bygone years. The only purpose the fort fulfils now is as a camping ground for Boy Scouts and picnic parties, and a sight for visitors. The buildings inside the fort once housed the garrison. The fort was well built and offers tribute to the efficiency and thoroughness of De Lannoy.

Social Condition

Caste System

The caste structure and its functioning in the society kept the majority of the people in a state of total subjugation to the minority in every aspect of social life.

The word 'Caste' comes from the Portuguese word 'Casta' signifies breed race or kind. The word 'jati' or caste used in India specifies a subdivision of the larger division 'Varna'. Varna is believed to have been based on colour or race. The origin of caste lies in the early history of India, and in the conquest of the original inhabitants by the Brahminical race. The European scholars generally held that the caste system was a product of the Aryan invasion, which led to the suppression of the native population.

54 Emily Gilchriest Hatch, *op.cit.*, p.252.
55 Ibid.
The Brahmins

The earliest inhabitants of this region were Dravidians. Aryans are believed to have colonised this region around the 10th of A.D.\textsuperscript{58} It is said that at the beginning of the eleventh century the Cholas defeated the Cheras at Kottar and brought the Nanchil Nadu under their control. The Chola influence caused confusion and affected the regular life of the people.\textsuperscript{59} Taking advantage of this situation the Brahmins of Cholamandalam came to Nanchil Nadu and took control of the temples. The Chola kings patronised them with grants and concessions and kept them at the top of the social ladder.\textsuperscript{60} Before the arrival of the Aryans the caste system was unknown in the Dravidian society.\textsuperscript{61} With the coming of the Brahmin into this area the whole of scenario changed. As in other parts of the country, the Brahmin constituted the upper most stratum of the caste hierarchy. Full liberty of education was limited to Brahmin alone while education was taboo for lower castes.\textsuperscript{62} Brahmins alone had the authority to interpret the scared law which was the basis of all other laws of the land and to pronounce judgement. Law was administered in the most discriminating manner.\textsuperscript{63} Brahmins were the only caste exempted from all social and religious disabilities.

\textsuperscript{59} Pillai, K.K., \textit{The Sucindram Temple}, p.26.
\textsuperscript{60} Chellam, V.T., \textit{Tamilaga Varalarum Panpadum} (Tamil), Trichy, 1978, pp.182-83.
\textsuperscript{61} Samuel Mateer, \textit{The Land of Charity}, London, 1870, p.28.
\textsuperscript{63} Sreedhara Menon, A., \textit{Social and Cultural History of Kerala}, Delhi, 1979, p.44.
“His word is law; his smile confers happiness and salvation; his power with heaven is unlimited; the very dust of his feet is purifying in its nature and efficacy. Each is an infallible pope in his own sphere”.64

The Travancore kings regarded it their sacred duty to please the Brahmins and to rule the country in accordance with the advice of the Brahmin scholars.65

The Brahmins were divided into Namboothiries or Malayali Brahmins and Foreign Brahmins and the former claimed superiority. Though they were few in number they occupied a higher status in the religious and state hierarchies than the foreign Brahmins.66 The Brahmin intruders mingled with the Naga Natives of Nanchil Nadu. They diplomatically trapped the Nagas by worshipping the Naga Gods and marrying Naga girls to their younger sons.67 Proud and arrogant the Nambudiris lived very secluded lives and many devoted themselves to the performance of religious ceremonies in connection with the temples. In all the great religious celebrations of the Raja, they were the principal celebrants.68

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64 Samuel mateer, *The Land of Charity*, p.32.
The Brahmins who were at the apex of the social structure and who functioned as the trustees of temples misappropriated for themselves vast temple properties. This accumulation of wealth made them idle pleasure-seekers unfit for hard work. From the 11th century to the 16th century the Brahmins were the real rulers enjoying power, privileges and immunities. The unlimited social, economic, political and religious power enjoyed by them was a barrier to the progress of the people and the society staggered under their domination.69

Several state ceremonies were constituted at enormous cost when the whole community of Brahmins was fed sumptuously for days together and paid for the performance of the rites.70 Throughout the state there were ottuperahs,71 free inns for Brahmins, where they received free food and entertainment at the expense of the state.72 Most of the Brahmin settlements in this region are found on the south of Zillah Court. Besides this the Brahmins are found at Krishnankoil, Meenakshipuram, Oluginasery, Nagarammankoil and Vadasery.73 As per the missionary records Vadiveeswaram area was thickly populated by Brahmins. By the social changes which had been taking place during the 19th century by the

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., p.20.
71 Ottupuras are the free feeding centres meant for the Brahmin, usually attached with the temples.
missionaries, the Brahmins naturally became the loosers, though their community also underwent considerable changes.

The Nairs

The next caste in the social scale was the Nairs and constituted the middle class. The people who were ready to serve the Brahmins were formed into a new caste, the Nairs, who in turn became their protectors in all respects. Though the Nairs were subordinate to the Brahmins they dominated over the other castes. There was much in common between the Brahmins and Nairs regarding their social status that they joined in the act of oppressing the lower classes represented by poor cultivators, labourers and slaves. They were also the ruling class in Travancore. They provided the army for the king during the pre-British period and even afterwards there was the Nair Brigade.

In Nanchil Nadu the Nairs were a real terror to the people. Their very name made the people tremble with tear. The southern Nairs were divided into twelve Pidakais or regions, whose representatives annually met at Sucindram during the car festival in the month of December. This National Council of Pidakaikkars sat in session for ten

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74 Kunjan Pillai, E., op.cit., p.314.
77 Pidakai was the term used to indicate the regions or districts into which Nanchilnadu was subdivided. Each important village of the region sent two or three delegates and they were called Pidakaikkars, who constituted the National Council of Pidakaikkars. Each Pidakai sent a brass drum and in all the National Council possessed twelve drums. The pidakaikkars used to march in grand processions with these drums sounding in front (Agur, C.M., Church History of Travancore, Madras, 1903, p.569).
days and dealt with caste rules and violations of the same in such manner that it became a terror to every one including the Rajah. Acting as the Supreme Court, they severely punished the offenders with no reference to any other authority, even inflicting capital punishment on them.⁷⁸ To avoid their displeasure state officials also consulted them on many matters of the state.

They were actually the ruling body of Nancilnad who controlled the people. The representatives of the 12 important Pidakaikars or villages marched arrogantly in procession to the beating of the twelve Pidakai drums, with the Pidagai staff in hand. They were followed by hundreds of Pillaimars, traditional clerks, holding their caste banners, medals and staff. The sight created such terror in the people that they fell down to the ground and worshipped them.⁷⁹

The enormities committed by these upper classes were unlimited. A person had to pay five fanams as Sircar rent failing which they would make him pay fifty fanams.⁸⁰ The lower castes were afraid of the higher castes as chickens at the sight of the kite. A low caste man was not allowed to erect a large house. If he dared to do so he must conciliate the Sudras by giving them whatever they asked for.⁸¹

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⁷⁸ Joy Gnanadhason, _op.cit._, p.23.
⁷⁹ Agur, C.M., _op.cit._, p.569f.
⁸¹ _Ibid._
They were also the principal owners of slaves. Before these lords of the land, who had the power to “Sell or Kill” their slaves, the lower caste people stood trembling with fear, at a prescribed distance, half bent, breasts bared, hand closing the mouth, a very picture of abject servitude. This was what ‘man had made of man’ in Agasteeswaram taluk. The Nairs did not like the work of the Christian missionaries mainly because very often it meant challenges to the established customs and social norms which resulted in their dominance over the lower castes being questioned.

The Vellalah

Nanchilnadu, bordering the Tirunelveli district was occupied by a people called the Vellalas. The word Vellalan is derived from Vellanmai (Vellam, water, anmai, management) meaning cultivation, tillage. Nancilnadu Vellalas had emerged based on the region occupied by them and on the basis of vegetarianism adopted by the different sections. They were known by the title ‘Pillai’. The Tamil Vellalas like the Nairs, enjoyed a high social status and possessed large areas of landed properties, mainly in Agasteeswaram taluk. The Saiva Pillamar have their houses in Nadu Theruvu immediately to the south of the Suchindram temple. The

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82 Joy Gnanadhason, op.cit., p.23.
83 Gladston, J.W., op.cit., p.27.
85 Pillay, K.K., *A Social History of the Tamil*, p.325.
Palmyra Tree Climber
Nanchilnadu Vellalas have their houses on the western wing of the west street and Tekkuman. 87

The Vellalas formed an association called "Vellala Association" to safeguard their interest and communal solidarity. T.M. Chidambarathanu Pillai, a freedom fighter was a member of the Vellalar association. Sivathanoo Pillai who took active part in the Tamil Nadu Congress Movement belonged to the Vellalar Community. 88 Vellalars like the Nairs, used the surname Pillai after their names and appeared equally dominant in the area. 89 Yet most of the Vellalas because of their marriage alliance with the Nairs, gave up the surname Pillai and assumed the surname 'Nanchil Nattu Nair'. 90 They adopted Brahminical rituals and kept themselves aloof from the low castes.

The Shanars or Nadars

The bulk of Shanars are found in this area. The high caste contemptuously called them Shanars, while they called themselves Nadars. The Nadars underwent hardship in their social and economic life. They were reduced to the level of total ignorance; it incapacitated them permanently to think in rational and scientific lines. 91 The hereditary occupation of the Shanars was that of cultivating and climbing the palmyrah palm from which they drew the sweet juice which they turned

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87 Pillay, K.K., The Suchindram Temple, p.10.
89 Thurston, Edgar, op.cit., p.241.
90 Ibid., p.243.
into coarse country sugar to eke out a living. The vast majority of them were severely depressed economically and suffered social degradation of a low caste in the rigid hierarchy of ritual purity.

The social position of the Shanars corresponded to that of the small farmers and agricultural labourers of the vast. They were found throughout the country always engaged in the more active operation of rural economy. But they were treated by the higher orders with bondage. However they occupied a socio-limbo somewhere between the Sudras and the outcaste untouchables. They were considered to be inferior to the Nairs and superior to the Pariahs. In other words they were the highest among the lowest classes or lowest of the middle classes.

The Shanars were industrious, simple minded, rude and unskilled. They ate freely of flesh and fish and drank the toddy extracted from the palm trees. Their women prevented from covering their bosom connected with the group of castes inferior to the Sudras. They were found throughout the country always engaged in the more active owners of palm groves, rent out the trees, or hire climbers to do the work for them. A hundred palmyrahs were said to be suffice to the support of two families by

94 Samuel Mateer, The Land of Charity, p.39.
96 Ibid.
99 Robert Caldwell, The Tinnevelly Shanars, p.44.
their produce of sugar coarse, fruits, leaves, fibre and timber. They were considered a half-polluting caste and though free from some of the restrictions placed on the still 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 could not milk cows or use balances to weigh tobacco and other articles.

The worship among the Nadars mainly took place in their own house. In a typical Nadar house a room on the south-west was always kept separate as a sacred place with a basket containing ashes in it. The senior male member of the family alone could enter this room, which led to the inference that the head of the family once acted as family priest. Offering to the dead in the form of fruits, cakes and flowers was also made in this room. They had village temples in a few places where deities such as Sastan, Amman, Bhadrakali etc., were worshipped and they had priests from their own caste.

The Shanars practised a non-Brahminical religion which included the worship of one Madan, formerly a washerman. Customs demanded that they should not worship the gods of the superior classes. So

104 Ibid.
they worshipped what were called inferior deities or demon. These malignant spirits, male and female of various names and antecedents, were supposed to haunt houses, burial grounds and gigantic trees, to produce fever, small pox and cholera, to possess women and others, to kill children and cause accident and all sorts of misfortune. Hence the people worshipped them out of fear rather than of love.

Their worship included devil dancing and devil sacrifice. They called the demons by different names such as Putam, Peih, Pusasu etc. Early temples were small thatched sheds of mud walls called peihkovils or devil temples. They had no access to the Hindu temples of the Brahminical type and on festival days, they were not even permitted to walk on the roads leading to the temples. They were not allowed the use of public wells.

More serious were their social bondages. The government and the caste Hindus oppressed the Nadars. The government imposed oppressive taxes and the most oppressive was a capitation tax which they collected even for the deceased members of the family. Talai Irai or Poll tax levied on all the male members of a family, living and the dead. When

111 Pillay, K.K., Social History of the Tamils, p.336.
some of the families migrated to the neighbouring district to avoid this tax, the relations of these families were forced to pay the tax on their behalf. They were also compelled to render grievous ‘Ooliam’ services (work without pay) to the Sirkar. Women of any status who refused to expose their breasts before the Brahmins were looked upon by them as immortal and immodest. If the women did so they were liable to be put to death. The government also extracted taxes from the palm trees from which they drew the sweet juice for their meagre existence. There were 50 types of taxes were collected like Kinattu vari, Wellu vari, Talappa vari, Ooliya vari, Panam Kizhangu vari, Katta vari, Aatra vari, Neeru vari, Kaal vari, Nadai vari, Veetu vari, Ottu vari, Olai vari, Ulavu vari, Ennai vari, Maattu vari etc.

Their using of head-gear umbrellas with handles and the growing of moustache needed specific permission on payment of a prescribed fee. There was a tax for the hair one grew and for the breasts of the women called a breast tax. Further more they were expected to supply to the government free of cost such things as palmyrah leaves for writing purposes. Gifts were expected from them by their high caste ‘over lords’ at the festivals of Onam, Dipavali, Harvest, the end of the year.

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and at various anniversaries and on occasions of royal marriages, birthdays etc.\textsuperscript{119} Till the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, there was no possibility for them to make progress, because the social structure did not give them any freedom, even to build decent houses.\textsuperscript{120}

Thus the Nadars as a caste groaned under the social system which existed in Agasteeswaram taluk. The work of the Christian missionaries attracted the Shanars to a great extent. Under the influence of the Christian religion the Shanar community began to struggle to secure the advantages of the new economic and educational opportunities offered by British India. No doubt in their initial struggle to uplift themselves, the European missionaries played a key role.\textsuperscript{121} To their efforts, the Shanar community responded so well that the greatest victories of the cross were won among them.

**The Parayas**

The lowest section in the society was the slave caste. Mainly the Parayas constituted this group. The Parayas were of Dravidian stock, speak Tamil and were found chiefly in the southern taluks. Bishop Caldwell says the word Paraya is derived from Parai or drum, as this caste furnishes the drummers especially at funerals.\textsuperscript{122} The Sudras held them in bondage and often bought and sold them like cattle. The value of a Paraya

\textsuperscript{120} *The Indian Evangelical Review*, Vol.1, No.5, July 1874, p.110.
\textsuperscript{121} Robert L. Hardgrave, *op.cit.*, p.42.
\textsuperscript{122} John A. Jacob, *op.cit.*, p.13.
varied from six to ten pagodas and that of a female reached perhaps twelve. The Parayas were of two types – Poroom Parayar and Moonay Parayar.\textsuperscript{123} But Buchanan classified them into three types viz., the Parayas properly so called, the Porum Parayan and the Mutruva Parayan.\textsuperscript{124} The Parayas had a taste for carrion and so they were detested by both the higher and lower classes. They were landless agricultural labourers, attached to the soil and they were very strong and muscular, capable of hard work.\textsuperscript{125} They were a dark skinned race-eating every species of food and hard working; they were intensely ignorant and debased.\textsuperscript{126} When a cow or bullock died it was left where it fell and only the Parayas would cut it up and carry it away.\textsuperscript{127} They were the lowest of the low and they suffered progressive degradation and enslavement. They lived in irregular cluster of conical hovels of palm leaves, commonly known as paraceris which were usually built up away from the residential quarter of the higher classes. Education was totally banned for them.\textsuperscript{128}

If a high caste man called a Paraya while ploughing a muddy field under the blasing sun, he would drop the plough and run up to him and stand at a respectable distance taking care to wear nothing above the waist or below the knee and receive any order which might be shouted at

\textsuperscript{123} Lieutenant Ward and Conner, \textit{op.cit.}, p.142.
\textsuperscript{124} Francis Buchanan, \textit{A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar}, Madras, 1894, p.493.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Sherring, M.A., \textit{The Tribes and Castes of the Madras Presidency}, Delhi, 1975, p.131.
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{T.D.C. Report for 1861}, Nagercoil Mission District, p.5.
\textsuperscript{128} Gladston, J.W., \textit{op.cit.}, p.38.
Parayas walking on the high road were required to run off into the jungles or fields when high caste people pass along. On one occasion a party of Brahman travellers, meeting a set of coolies carrying a heavy log of timber, ordered them to put it down and run off the road. This they positively declined, under the circumstances to do, and the Brahmans began to beat them; but the coolies at last, lay down their load and gave them as much as they got.\textsuperscript{130}

If a Paraya touched a Brahmin, the latter must make expiation by immediately bathing and reading much of the sacred books, and changing his Brahmanical thread. Temples must not be approached within a certain distance by the low castes. The low castes had their own temples and deities of an inferior kind and dare not touch even the outer walls of a Hindu temple.\textsuperscript{131} When travelling by rail along with other classes, they dare not even take a draught of water to refresh themselves, and often there was great suffering from hunger where habitations belonging to their own caste were not at hand.\textsuperscript{132}

The Parayas and other slave castes should not approach the Brahmins within seventy two paces and must cry out from a distance whenever a Brahmin came in sight.\textsuperscript{133}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{130}] Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.335.
\item[\textsuperscript{131}] \textit{Ibid.}, p.333.
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] \textit{Ibid.}, p.334.
\end{itemize}
breath should go forth and pollute the high caste man. The higher classes enjoyed their services and even their manufactures but if a high caste man touched a Paraya by accident, he was obliged to purify himself by a bath. For selling their manufacture the slave castes used to place their articles on the high way and shout out their prices to the passers-by from a specified distance and prospective purchaser would place the price money on a stone kept at a distance and take the goods. So also, they could purchase articles from the high caste merchants by placing their money on the stone. The seller took the money and left the goods for which he received the money.

These cruel restrictions not only barred the free movement of the slaves but deprived them of the chances of getting justice in the hands of the government. They could not even enter the courts of justice to seek redress for grievances. If they must they had to stand away from the high caste magistrate at the appropriate distance and take their chance of being heard. A policeman was sometimes stationed between the low caste witness or prisoner and the high caste judicial officer to transmit the questions and answers. They could not even speak the language of the ordinary people. The slaves were forced to use certain totally degrading

135 Ibid., p.47.
137 Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity*, p.46.
words with reference to themselves, their families, children and life and with utmost respect while referring to their masters.\textsuperscript{138}

Of the other minor ethnic groups of the region may be mentioned the Chettis, the Vannans, the Vaniyans, the Barbers, the Weaver classes, the Saliyans and the Edayans.\textsuperscript{139}

\textbf{Slavery}

For thousands of years these lowest castes had continued in a state of hereditary servitude and adject poverty, exposed to the brutality of the owner, and disposable according to his pleasure, too abhorrent, at the same time, on account of caste pollution, to be touched or closely approached by their superiors or to be admitted to any of the privileges or amenities of religion.\textsuperscript{140} The number of persons originally reduced to a state of slavery was increased by the sale of children in times of famine and distress. The price of a slave varied from Rs.6/- to Rs.9/-. In some parts of the country, however, slaves were sold for Rs.18/-.\textsuperscript{141}

Another source of the supply of slaves consisted of high caste females exposed to this punishment when detected in immorality or breach of caste rules. According to Day, a Brahman woman erring with a low caste woman or a low caste woman having improper intimacy with a

\textsuperscript{138} Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.32.
\textsuperscript{139} Velupillai, T.K., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.II, p.596.
\textsuperscript{140} Samuel Mateer, S., \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.297.
\textsuperscript{141} John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}, p.118.
Brahman was sold to the Muhammadans.\textsuperscript{142} Though these slave castes were the most unprivileged sections of the society a slave caste man was, by custom, allowed to take away any woman of the upper class if found outside after dusk during Pulapedikalam, which fell probably during the month of February and March or during the month of July and August. If a slave threw a stone at a high caste woman, the latter would lose her caste.\textsuperscript{143} Slave owner was at liberty to let or transfer his servants as he pleased to separate the children from the parents and the wife from the husband; to give them as presents to his friends, or allot them as the wedding dowry of his daughters; to assign them over as a payment for his debts and in short, as he expressed, to him they are "as cattle".\textsuperscript{144} Many fell victims to fever and other diseases; and very few lived to old age. They were but poorly fed and scantily clothed and were notorious for drunkenness, dishonesty and evil passions.

**Illiteracy**

There is no clear evidence to know what kind of educational system prevailed in this taluk, before the advent of the missionaries. But we can definitely say that there was no public instruction as such.\textsuperscript{145} The native government failed to see the necessity for such a system. There

\textsuperscript{142} Ivy Peter and D. Peter, *Samaya Thondarkalum Samudhaya Marumalarchiyum* (Tamil), Nagercoil, 1999, p.69.

\textsuperscript{143} Desika Vinayagam Pillai, *Kavimaniyin Urai Monigal* (Tamil), Madras, 1953, p.120.

\textsuperscript{144} Samuel Mateer, S., *The Land of Charity*, p.43.

\textsuperscript{145} Pillay, K.K., *Social History of the Tamils*, p.396.
existed a kind of village education which was exclusively for high caste boys. Women's education was given no importance. On the whole, even those of the higher castes remained uneducated.146

Traditional customs and blind beliefs had reduced them to mere junks without any respectable position. Thrown into seclusion, women of lower castes, in particular, were under the yoke of servitude.147 The lower castes were denied to get education.148

The female education was entirely unknown and none of the woman was able to read. It was never considered necessary to educate women for, as one of their proverbs says, “To educate a woman is like putting a torch in the hand of a monkey”.149 Though Agasteeswaram taluk boasts of peculiar castes among whom widowhood was never possible and women held a high places and were admitted to the benefits of education, it appears from the census that after, all only a triffle over one per cent of the Malayalam Sudra females could read and write and but a little larger proportion of Brahman women; only 93 females of the hundreds of thousands of Illavars and not one amongst the heathen Parayas, Pulayas and other lower castes.150

The Paraya had no education, for who would be found willing to teach, or even to approach the impure one. The language which

147 Samuel Mateer, Native Life in Travancore, p.209.
148 Pillay, K.K., A Social History of the Tamils, p.391.
he was compelled to use was in the highest degree abject and degrading. He dare not say ‘I’ but ‘Adiyan’, your slave. He dare not call his rice ‘Choru’ but ‘Karikude’, dirty gruel. His house was called ‘Madam’ a hut. His children, he spoke of as monkeys or calves. When speaking he must place his hand over the mouth, lest the breath should go forth and pollute the person whom he is addressing”.

Ill-Health

In the early days the prevalent diseases in this area were fever, cholera and small pox among the epidemics and ulcers anaemia, diarrhoea, leprosy and dysentery among the sporadic kind. Cholera broke out in an unusually severe form at the end of December at Nagercoil and Suchindrum having been of course, imported from the Tinnevelley district by visitors to the annual car festival at Suchindrum. Various courses contributed to produce this disease. The densely packed village system of house distribution, the scarcity of water supply, the traditional uncleanliness of the lower classes of the people and their general apathy and ignorance with cholera appeared and did its frightful havoc. Small pox was another disease that occurred in an epidemic form and caused terrible havoc among the people.

153 Ibid., p.506.
In sickness they murmured against God and his dealings with them, or attributed all their sufferings to the agency of malignant spirit of inexorable fate.\textsuperscript{154} The Hindus who constituted the great mass of the population generally looked upon the disease as a special manifestations of the power of their deities and look upon any attempt to control the course of it as little less than impious.\textsuperscript{155} Ulcers, anaemia, diarrhoea were very common among the lower classes of the people and are mainly attributed to the ingestion of insufficient and unwholesome food, scanty clothing and exposure to cold and wet.

Leprosy also prevalent in this area. It was considered a dreadful disease for which it was believed there was no cure. The dread of infection and the stigma attached to the disease made those who were affected by it objects of horror. Those found suffering from leprosy were thrown out of the towns and villages. Most of them had no choice except to beg. Even this was not easy as they were literally driven out of the streets by the frightened people.\textsuperscript{156}

The largest incidence of deaf-mutism was observed in this taluk. The blind were naturally more equally distributed than those with other infirmities, the higher proportion being observed. Sickness and

\textsuperscript{154} Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.211.
\textsuperscript{155} Nagam Aiya, \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.III, p.507.
\textsuperscript{156} Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.87.
ailment were very often attributed to the anger of Gods who had to be appeased and propitiated with sacrifices and libation of blood.

The belief in the spirits was so deep rooted that the people even refused to take medicine for curing certain diseases. Consequently a large number of them fell victims to the severity of the melady and several of the bigoted devil dancers also shared the same fate. Their obstinacy brought on them no trifling loss for about one fifteenth of their entire number was swept away by the plague.\textsuperscript{157} The slavish fear of demons overruled the feeble hearted people also and in times they went to the ruins of devil houses which they had deserted and offered sacrifices to the demons.\textsuperscript{158}

\textbf{Superstition Belief}

The lower class people believed in some concepts which cannot be explained rationally. Among such concepts religious ideas and practices, omens and auguries and myths found a place. There was the deep rooted belief in malignant demons. People believed that they were surrounded by a ghostly company of powers, elements and tendencies of which no image could be made and no definite idea should be formed. These demons were supposed to have their own spheres of influence. One presiding over cholera, another over small pox, another over cattle disease and so on.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{TDC Report for 1875}, Tittuvillai Mission District, pp.4ff.
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{TDC Report for 1876}, Neyyoor Mission District, p.7.
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{TDC Report for 1874}, Neyyoor Mission District, pp.9f.
A belief in and a constant dread of the influence of demons and evil spirits have been an essential part of Hindu religious thought from earliest times. It was most common among Nadars in this taluk, where they lived in large numbers. Peikoils or demons shrines were numerous. The spirits of depraved men or of those who had met with a violent or abnormal death were believed to become demons and wander about inflicting injury upon mankind and demanding worship.\textsuperscript{160}

At night the devil was believed to call loudly in order to lure people from their homes into the jungle and to kill them. Hence calls at night were never responded to until the fourth repetition, as devils would not call more men thrice. The devils which had such power to afflict men, were appeased by sacrifices and their influence averted by charms and incantations.\textsuperscript{161}

Connected with the foregoing superstition was the observance of the Rahukalam, which was considered the most inauspicious period to undertake any important business or wait on a superior.\textsuperscript{162} Both good and evil omens were known to the lowest people. The sound of lizard in or around the house was considered a good omen. If the left eyelids of women throbbed, it was believed to be a good omen. The cawing of a crow was considered to be an indication of the arrival of

\textsuperscript{160} John A. Jacob, \textit{op. cit.}, p.5.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., pp.5ff.
\textsuperscript{162} Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{op. cit.}, p.126.
guests. The howling of owl was considered to be an evil omen. A particular day, the Uvaa day, was considered an inauspicious day. If the branches of a tree were dried up, it was considered a bad omen. When a person wanted to proceed on an important mission, he would start only if he saw good omen.

The propagation of smallpox was attributed to Mari Amman, who, though reckoned among the evil spirits, yet was generally ranked with the principal divinities, she being an incarnation of Parvati, the consort of Siva. When the disease broke out in a village and continues to rage for sometime, the inhabitants sought to propitiate this goddess by means of bloody sacrifices and other offerings. They would also place her image on a car and carry it about with great solemnity through the streets of three successive nights. Her priests called (Poosaries) likewise perambulate the village every day bearing a pot on their heads decked with margosa leaves and when they happened to pass by a house the inmates ran out to meet them and pour water on their set.

**Position of Women**

Women were considered inferior to men. It was even believed that girls who were taught the three R's namely reading, writing and arithmetic would become widows soon and widowhood was the

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bitterest misfortune a woman could ever think of in society. Girls after maturity were not allowed to go out for fear that demons would molest them.

Without education, moral training, or real knowledge of the world, the majority of women spent their time mostly within the four walls of the kitchen. All women were to obey the laws and customs of the country. The social evils of untouchability and unapproachability played havoc on the lives of women. Early marriage was the order of the day. There is one little girl of about eleven years of age, a widow. After marriage a girl was left to the mercy of her mother-in-law. Crimes of murder, assault and robbery were prevalent in those days. Similarly outrages were freely committed upon the weak and defenceless.

Furthermore the social and religious customs of the time prevented women from developing their intellect. A large number of girls were, often in infancy, dedicated to the service of temples as devadasis. The miseries of widows were manifold. They were not allowed to remarry. One can hear only allude to the intolerable miseries of widows, of whom the late census showed that there were no fewer than 63,000 under ten years of age, and fifteen and a half million between ten and twenty, all

167 Samuel Mateer, *The Gospel in South India*, London, nd., p.188.
prohibited from marrying a second time. They were not permitted to wear ornaments or colourful dress. Newly married people were not allowed to meet a widow lest calamity befell them. Such ostracism told upon the mental well-being of the widows.\footnote{Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.209.} Education was denied to women for fear that they would become unfit for obedience and humble labour.\footnote{Job Thomas, \textit{The Contribution of the Free Church of Scotland to Female Education to Madras}, 1840-1875, 1964, p.20.} At night they slept on the floor, or on a plaited coconut leaf or an old mat. Dress, food and dwellings were alike uncleanly. A mother whose baby had died must not even touch the child of another until she had another living child.

The females of the family generally waited upon the man until they finished their meals. They used no tables or chairs or spoons, but sat on mats spread on the ground, with very little clothing and eat with the hand.\footnote{Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.204.} By strict conventions and rigid rules they were bidden to wear a coarse piece of cloth known as ‘mundu’ extending from the waist to the knees leaving the breasts bare.\footnote{Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.35.} The plight of the low caste women was pitiable. They had to work hard for their daily food. Very early in the morning, the slave women went to their masters to get instructions about their day’s work. They went on working in the fields throughout the day with the blazing sun beating on the bare head and the feet.\footnote{Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.210.} Women were not allowed to see any men except the dearest members of their family. As a consequence of the age long oppression, the Nadars, as a
class, became timid, deceitful and ignorant. The caste regulations required low caste females to carry the water pot only on the head, not on the hip or side. The untouchable slave women were prohibited from drawing water from the wells of the caste Hindus.\textsuperscript{177}

The social circumstances and daily life of the poor low caste or slave women, who were obliged to labour for their daily support. Sometimes they had nothing to eat on any day on which they remained idle. They presented the condition of extreme and enforced degradation in which they had been so long kept, and the contempt and abhorrence with which they were universally regarded.\textsuperscript{178} They worked hard, suffered much from sickness and often from want of food and generally, like all slaves, also form evil habits of thieving, sensuality, drunkenness and vice, which increased or produced disease and suffering.

They were kept toiling in manuring, planting, or reaping through the day in the agricultural season and return in the evening, fatigued and hungry, to their wretched huts to boil their rice and eat it with salt and pepper.\textsuperscript{179}

It was a land of female degradation. Among the many unjust burdensome taxes levied on the backward classes, was called a breast tax. The inhumanity and injustice in the collection and nature of this tax was seen when an Ezhava lady, who was unable to bear the humiliation of the

\textsuperscript{177} Yesudas, R.N., \textit{A History of Women Education in Kerala}, Trivandrum, 1988, p.22.  
\textsuperscript{178} Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.207.  
\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Ibid.}
caste Hindus. Tax collectors had to cut off one of her breasts and present it to them. The lower caste women could not cover their bodies at any time.\(^{180}\)

An incident that took place in Thazhakudy, a place 8 miles away from Nagercoil, shows how much suffering the poor slave women underwent. A pregnant slave girl, because she was a bit late to go to her masters' farm, was pulled out of her hut severely flogged, tied to the yoke and was made to plough the farm in lieu of an ox. In her agony she fell dead in the mire.\(^{181}\)

**Devadasi System**

The status of women was further lowered by the introduction of the Devadasi system. Originally the Devadasis were young women attached to the temples to raise funds for the temples through musical and dance performances. Soon the profession degenerated and the domains girls became a prey to the lust of feudal chieftains and rich landlords.\(^{182}\)

These women existed merely to entertain them. With this degeneration, the post of a Devadasi became hereditary and came to be identified with temple prostitution. The total number of Devadasis as returned by the census of 1901 were 416 among them 243 belonged to

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\(^{180}\) Joy Gnanadhason, *op.cit.*, p.35.


\(^{182}\) Joy Gnanadhason, *op.cit.*, p.36.
Agasteeswaram taluk. They were much sought after till the beginning of this century by the members of the royal family when they visited the temples. They were locally known as ‘Kudikkaris’ and were referred to officially as ‘Adumpatras’ (dancing girls). Those attached to the Sripadmanabhaswami temple at Trivandrum were drawn from the Padamangalam caste of the Sudras. This sub-division also supplied the temple servants in the Agasteeswaram taluk.

These incidents proved that the people had to bear all these obstacles patiently. They looked up for a saviour. The Hindu society that was in its full blossom and noted for its charity closed its eyes to the hue and cry of the people. Their prayers did not open their hearts and hence they stretched their arms in vain to save them from the inhuman torture. It was during this time Christian missionaries came one after the other and began to teach the people about the oppression that they were undergoing in the society and thus opened their eyes.

**ECONOMIC CONDITION**

The lower castes suffered under poverty and hunger. In the early days the economic system was based on feudalism. It affected the low caste people. The vast majority of the people lived in villages. Defective laws adversely affected the economic growth of the country.

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The caste restrictions destroyed the unity and morale of the country.\textsuperscript{186} The administrative hierarchy consisted of Valia Sarvadhi Kariakkars, Sarvadhi Kariakkars, Kariakkars and proverittikkars. They were concerned with the collection of revenue, the dispensing of Justice and maintenance of law and order. They were eager to have control over the king and the dewan. "These men" writes John Cox, "find their way into every corner, seizing the people's goods and forcing them, in the name of their government, to labour without pay".\textsuperscript{187}

Based on feudalism Venad was divided into Nadus. Nadus were divided into Desams and were in turn divided into Karais. A Nadu was supervised by Naduvazhi and Desam by Desavazhi. They were Nairs. As landlords the Nairs were also called Janmies.\textsuperscript{188} They were exempted from paying tax to the state.

The Nambudiri Brahmins who were at the apex of the social structure and who functioned as trustees of temples misappropriated enormous temple properties and endowments and the income derived from them. This led eventually to the abnormal accumulation of land and wealth in their hands.\textsuperscript{189} At the same time the properties owned by several ordinary tenants were transferred by them to the control of individual Brahmins landlords and temple managements and the properties so transferred became Brahma swams and Devaswams which by convention,

\begin{itemize}
\item[187] \textit{L.M.S. Report for 1841}, p.72.
\item[188] Sreedhara Menon, A., \textit{A Social and Cultural History of the Kerala}, p.76.
\item[189] Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.29.
\end{itemize}
enjoyed immunity from forcible occupation and devastation at the hands of the enemy force.\textsuperscript{190} The lower castes were given the land on lease or were employed as labourers for the cultivation of the lands. This system brought about an economy which exploited the tenants at the bottom and gave to those at the top, the Jannies, tremendous economic, political and social power.\textsuperscript{191} The rigid rules of caste with the triple social evils of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability denied them the choice of any other work.\textsuperscript{192}

The low castes viz., the Shanars, the Pallars, and the Parayas were also subjected to the abnoxious exactions of the Sircar officials. One of the severe fines which was imposed on lower caste people was called “Prayachitham”. Many times this fine was collected compulsorily from other non-mistaken people. ‘Puruchantharam’ was another tax which was more severe than Prayachitam when a person had a property from his ancestors, he should pay this tax.\textsuperscript{193} If any one died without a heir in Marumakkathayam system, the person who was appointed a heir of that family should pay ‘Adiyara’ tax. The value of this tax was one fourth of the value of his property.\textsuperscript{194} In 1754 a head tax was imposed on the Shanars for defraying military expenditure. A house tax called kuppakalca

\textsuperscript{190} Sreedhara Menon, A., A Social and Cultural History of the Kerala., p.76.  
\textsuperscript{191} Joy Gnanadhason, \textit{op.cit.}, p.29.  
\textsuperscript{192} \textit{Ibid.}  
\textsuperscript{193} Ivy Peter and Peter, D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.61.  
was also collected from the low castes.\textsuperscript{195} When they changed the roof of their house, they should give another tax for it. When they had the palmyra, coconut, arecanut, mango, jack fruit, punnai, illuppai trees they should pay the tax for every tree and the land where the trees grew. They also paid tax for the uncultivated lands.\textsuperscript{196} The people who lived in hilly or mountain areas should pay the mountain tax. Every one should pay separate tax for their occupations. The Palmyra climbers should pay tax for his ladder and the ring which was used for putting in his legs during climbing the Palmyra trees. The hunter should pay for his bow and arrow. The toddy makers should give 1 litre toddy on a tax for one pot toddy.\textsuperscript{197} Taxes on inheritance and several fines\textsuperscript{198} were also imposed. Curious to say that the Nadar had to pay poll tax not only for the young and old ones but also for the dead and on account of this cruel demand of the Sirkar.\textsuperscript{199} The poor Shanars who could not afford to pay the burden some taxes migrated to Tirmevelly. The poll-tax revenue figures for the year 1807-1808 showed that a sum of Rs.88,044 was raised from the Shanars and the Ezhavas alone whereas the poll-tax amount collected from other castes amounted to only Rs.4,624/-.\textsuperscript{200}

\textsuperscript{196} Nagam Aiya, V., \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.III, p.348.
\textsuperscript{197} Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.292.
\textsuperscript{198} Dewan Venkata Row in his confidential Report to the British President dated January 8, 1829 stated that there were about 70,000 Shanars living in the region from Agasteeswaram to Vilavankod. They were a turbulent and insubordinate race. Hard and oppressive regulations were enacted imposing pressing an unusual taxes with a view to put down their turbulence. (Political consultations dated Fort St. George, March 17, 1829, Sl. No.193, p.410).
\textsuperscript{199} John A. Jacob, \textit{op.cit.}, p.41.
\textsuperscript{200} Agur, C.M., \textit{op.cit.}, pp.583ff.
Besides these, the community was burdened with oppressive taxes like "Tali Erai", "Yelutholai Erai", net tax for fishermen owning nets for fishing, tax for oil mongers, tax for weavers and tax on village lands. Male members particularly, of the Nadar community, were compelled to render Ooliam services on Sundays to the sircar. Taxes were collected by the sircar officials with ruthless severity. Taxes were given to government for the festivals like Deepavali, Harvesting and Annual festivals. The officers who collected taxes gave only a small portion of money to the government and got the receipt. William Tobeas Ringeltaube, recorded in his diary instance of such cruelties. On 21st November 1812 Viraputra Pillay, the tax peon of Cotaram went to Guruswami, the Karyakar of Tamarakulam and demanded all the taxes of his subdivision i.e. 11 ½ fanams for the 18 houses in anticipation of the coming year. Guruswami replied that he would pay the amount only in monthly instalments as usual. Much annoyed over this Viraputra Pillay took the firelock from the attending tana peon and having taken out the flint, screwed it with the cock to the poor Shanar's ear, where it hung eighty minutes till the money was paid. In the absence of their husbands women were tortured by having rice postill twisted into their hair or a great

\[\text{201} \text{ Tax for wearing Tali by married women.}\]
\[\text{202} \text{ Free supply of Palmyra leaves to Sirkar for writing purposes.}\]
\[\text{203} \text{ Village headman.}\]
\[\text{204} \text{ John A. Jacob, op. cit., p.41.}\]
stone placed on four small pebbles on their backs, standing all the time in an unnatural posture.\textsuperscript{205}

Besides domestic duties in the house and marketing, the poorer women must work for a living as actively often as the men. Cooly women who lived by their daily labour, commenced work at seven in the morning, rested for an hour at noon, and left off work at five in the evening. Many were engaged in their lighter departments of field work, gathering leaves and cutting twigs for manure, carrying these to the fields, transplanting, weeding, reaping and threshing rice.\textsuperscript{206}

Two other Christians Narayanan and Mari Perumal had the fire-locks hanging nearly two hours on their ears in Tamarakulam. Poor people who had no money in hand were necessarily obliged to borrow from others hoping to pay them back when they could realize a profit from their fields.\textsuperscript{207} It is, however, interesting to know that the Christians missions work were carried to the lowest class people where these uncivilized people have been living for centuries.

The suffering sections did not have the proper leadership to lead them towards the light. Every one believed in the superiority of his own caste and tried to isolate the others from the society. Communal harassment, economic exploitation and social oppression became the order

\textsuperscript{205} Agurc, C.M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.586.
\textsuperscript{206} Samuel Mateer, \textit{Native Life in Travancore}, p.201.
\textsuperscript{207} Agur, C.M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.587.
of the day. After the arrival of missionaries, they helped the unprivileged sections to overcome the inhibitions inflicted upon them. The evil system of slavery, illiteracy, ill-health, superstitious belief, poverty and caste distinction of the society were changed. In short, the various missions could change the social complexion to a considerable extent.