

Chapter - III

SOCIAL CONDITION

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Social organization

Caste formed one of the major characteristic features of Hindu Social System. No society in the world is free from the clutches of division. Every Society is caste ridden and in one form or the other, caste system exists even among the most advanced societies of the world. In advanced societies caste system is used for social control and also for determining the status of individual in society. From the available records one can come to the conclusion that caste system existed in ancient Egyptian, Mexican, Persian, and many other societies.

In India there are more than three thousand castes, each a culturally distinct, endogamous community sharing traditionally a common occupation and particular position in the localized caste hierarchy. Each caste shares a culture that distinguishes it from other caste in the village or locality by its manner of behaviour and speech, the style of dress and ornamentation, the food habits and the general pattern life.

The word caste is a Portuguese one to describe the social division among the people of Hinduism, caste is also tasty and so completely accepted by all, including those who condemned it, that it is every where the unit of social action.¹ Caste's a primordial tie persists in the midst of change, retaining its traditional endogamy as the basic primary unit beyond the family. In the Indian languages, the major caste division is called *varna* and sub division called *jathi* which in Tamil is termed as *kulam*.²

¹Srinivas. M.N., Caste in Modern India, New Delhi, 1962, pp.39-42.

²Dharma Kumar, Land and Caste in South India, New Delhi, 1992, pp.55-56.

The Aryans who were familiar with the conventional system of Varnashrama dharma in North India found an entirely different social set up during their migration to South India. Up to their migration, the people of South India appeared contented with their respective professions, wherein they never thought of any superior or inferior status among themselves. The Aryan infiltrations injected distinctions based on upper and lower status into the body politic of the South Indian society, especially in the minds of various professional groups which led to regular confrontations among them. The Brahmins, who formed the microscopic minority, emerged as the greatest arbitrators and peace makers and extended their counsel to the reigning kings too. By virtue of their spiritual authority vested under the varna system, they commanded supreme influence in the society.

The earliest Dravidians were not primitive tribals, but settled people who tilled the ground and raised crops of various kinds. They were agriculturists by nature.³ It was a harmonious classification for the effective functioning of the society. No distinction was made on the basis of birth and everything was decided on merit, ability and personality. Untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability and similar customs were unknown to the ancient Tamils.⁴ Caste distinctions, disputes and religious dissensions were totally absent during those days.

The people in Ramnad as elsewhere in ancient Tamilakam were familiar with an occupational division of the society and were not accustomed to the traditional fourfold classification of society or *chaturvarna* system. On the other hand, geography had its decisive impact upon the society. Based on the fertility of the soil and its geographical location, the land was divided into five natural divisions, viz.,

³Sesha Iyengar, T.R., The Ancient Dravidians, Madras, 1925, p. 57.

⁴Sobhanan, B., Temple Entry Movement and Sivakasi Riots, Madurai, 1985, pp.1-2.

kurinchi (hilly region), The people who inhabited in these regions were *Vettuvār* (hunters), *mullai* (pastoral lands) *Ayar* (cowherds), *marutham* (cultivable land), *Ulavar* (peasants), *palai*, (barren region), *Maravar* (warriors), and *neythal* (coastal area). *Paradavar* (fishermen) respectively.⁵ In ancient Tamilakam, the entire land system remained under the direct control of the sons of the soil. Ramnad area mostly came under *palai*, the barren region with its inhabitants called Maravars habitually warriors.

There were corporate companionships or brotherhoods of elementary families comprising the members of the clans who regarded one another as relative of the common lineage and the kins within the elementary family.⁶ Free social movement existed among the different groups. The ancient Dravidians were regarded as the direct ancestors of the Tamils, Telugu, Malayalam, Canarese and other tribes who occupied the greater part of South India.⁷

Caste system which became very prominent in North India came to the Dravidian South comparatively later, for the earliest Tamil literature shows a society divided into tribal groups with little sense of precedence of one over the other. Succeeding centuries saw the gradual hardening of classes, until south Indian Brahmins became even stricter in their ritual observances and South Indian untouchables even more debased than those of the North. Early Tamil literature gives no evidence of caste, but the growth of Aryan influence and the development of a more complex political and economic structure, produced a system which in some ways was more rigid than that of the North.

⁵ Kanaka Sabhai, V., The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago, Madras, 1966, pp. 113-114.

⁶ Singaravelu, S., Social Life of the Tamils, Kuala Lumpur, 1966, p.197.

⁷ Krishna Menon, T.K., The Dravidian Culture and its Diffusion, Ernakulam, 1937, p. 11.

The increased inflow of Aryans from North India and the consequent Aryan colonization ushered in a new era marked by significant socio- economic and political changes. The social background of South India totally differed from the conventional system of *varnashrama dharma* that prevailed in North India. Upto their migration, the people of Ramnad like the rest of South India appeared happy with their respective professions. They never thought of their superior or inferior status. P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar wrote: "The Brahmins did not succeed in arranging the people of Southern India as members of the four *varnas* as they did in Northern India. It only led to the confusion of caste and the prevalence of social jealousies that have characterised the life of South India for a thousand five hundred years".⁸ The Aryan immigration injected the distinctions based on upper and lower status into the body politic of the South Indian society. It might have naturally developed a doubt in the minds of all the professional groups, which led to regular confrontations. The Brahmins who formed the microscopic minority emerged as the greatest arbitrators and peacemakers and extended their counsel to the reigning kings too. By virtue of their spiritual authority, they commanded considerable influence in the society.⁹ With the establishment of the Brahmanical ascendancy the sons of the soil lost their freedom.

The Brahmin writers on law propounded a model of the caste system which placed them at the top and gave them the privilege of declaring the duties of other castes, including the kings.¹⁰ In order to proclaim their spiritual superiority and temporal welfare, they gerrymandered customs and conventions, administrative and socio-economic systems and brought the entire society under the provisions of the Sastras. The essential principles of caste system traditionally observed in Hindu society

⁸ Srinivasa Iyengar, P.T., Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture, Madras, 1914, p. 20.

⁹ Rajayyan, K., Administration and Society in the Carnatic, 1701-1801, Tirupati, 1966, p.127.

¹⁰ Srinivas, M.N., Social Change in Modern India, Berkely, 1966, p.5.

are unchangeable inequality based on birth, the gradation and inequality of vocational professions and restrictions on marriage outside one's own group. In essence one's birth into a particular caste decided all spheres of his activity. Whether this system is a theoretical division of society, a sociological fiction or a Platonic myth, it has worked definitely to the advantage of the Aryan immigrants. Further the position afforded to the Brahmins by the local kings and the increasing use of Sanskrit forms provided the base for the introduction of the hierarchical organisation of caste into the society.¹¹

Following the large scale migration of the Aryans to the South, the society was divided into Brahmins, non-Brahmins and untouchables. The Aryan theory that mankind is divided into four *varnas* or castes-Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra was wholly foreign to the southerners.¹² There were no genuine Kshatriyas or Vaisyas in the peninsular India and the use of these categories in this area are referred only to local castes which had successfully claimed Vaisya or Kshatriya status. The introduction of the inferior and superior status led to a competition among the different communities to receive the sacramental recognition of the Brahmins for their claims. The local people who stood with the Brahmins became the touchables and those who opposed the Brahmins were reduced to the position of outcastes.

In Tamilakam the non-Brahmins, including the untouchables, during the medieval period were broadly divided into Valankai or Right hand and Idankai or Left hand castes. The exact origin of these two groups has been examined by several scholars, but no definite answer has been given to this interesting question. Some of the inscriptions state that each group consisted of ninety eight sub-sects. Though one gets the names of some sects in each group the names of all the ninety eight sects are not known. But side by side with these; there is reference to groups of

¹¹Robert, L., Hardgrave, Jr., *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, 1955, p.10.

¹²Smith, V. A., *The Oxford History of India*, London, 1958, p. 42.

eighteen professional castes.¹³ Prof. K.K. Pillai writes: "Perhaps a large measure of laxity existed in the Sangam Age; but there is no-doubt that the stiffening of the hereditary increased with the lapse of time".¹⁴ The ninety eight sects under each of the two divisions were generally of the industrial and agricultural classes.¹⁵ The Brahmins and a few other communities who claimed the highest predominance were kept aloof from these two groups. These superior castes acted as the creators of troubles between the right and the left hand factions.¹⁶ The Ramnad region became one of the worst centres of Valankai and Idankai disputes.

The division of the society led to regular confrontations among the different sects of the two groups. Abbe Dubois wrote: "This division into right hand and left hand factions whoever invented it has turned out to be the most direful disturber of the public peace. It has proved a perpetual source of riots and the cause of endless animosity among the natives."¹⁷ Most of the skirmishes are centred on certain privileges like the right to wear slippers or to ride through the streets in a palanquin, or on horseback during marriage festivals, Sometimes it is the privilege of being escorted on certain occasions by armed retainers, sometimes that of having a trumpet sounded in front of a procession or of being accompanied by a native musician at public ceremonies. Further it is simply in the use of a particular kind of musical instrument suitable for such occasions the right of carrying flags of certain colours or certain devices during these ceremonies. The Ramnad region witnessed terrible confrontations between the Maravas and the Nadars on grounds of such socio-religious privileges.

¹³ Mahalingam, T.V., Administration and Social Life Under-Vijayanagar, Part.II, Madras, 1975, p.236.

¹⁴ Pillay, K.K., Social History of the Tamils, Madras, 1975, p. 236.

¹⁵ Hanumanthan, K.R., Untouchability- A Historical Review, Madurai, 1979, p.175.

¹⁶ Chidambaram Pillai, P., Right of Temple Entry, Nagercoil, 1933, p. 247.

¹⁷ Abbe J., A. Dubois, Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies, Oxford, 1897, pp.16-17.

It is recorded in the Proceedings of the Home Department, Fort William, Bengal that the custom of accompanying religious processions with music gave rise to frequent breaches of the peace and became the subject of complaint by persons of other sects.¹⁸ As per the Mackenzie Manuscript the right hand caste people who were designated as the Valankai caste used *savarkkali* and white umbrella. They were permitted to ride on white horses and possess five sembus. The Vellalar, Agambadaiyar; Idaiyar, Kavarai-Komutti, Kaikolar, Ceder and Ceniya (oil monger) were included in the Valankai group. The Vannar, Ambattar and Pariahs also used white cloths. Those who were having carts were also having five sembus. None among Idankai caste was allowed the use of *savarkhali* and white horse.¹⁹

The Kammalas or the artificers including the goldsmiths and carpenters who held a high place in the pre-Aryan days were reduced to the status of Idankai caste people. But they were permitted to wear sacred thread and assume the title of Achari but they were not allowed to perform *upanayana* ceremony. Further they exercised the privilege to have double conches, drums beaten on auspicious occasions, put on shoes while going on a journey and whitewash their houses.²⁰ In due course influenced by the Aryan immigrants, the reigning princes began to ban such privileges. The Kammalas sought the support of other Idankai caste people like the Pallas, another fallen community who formed the agricultural serfs in the Tamil society, to restore their lost privileges. The Valankai caste people assuming themselves as superior to the Idankai people prevented them from bearing a white or green umbrella, banner with the emblem of swan, monkey, cuckoo plough, white horse, travelling in palanquins, wearing white petticoat, erecting grand gateways or *thoranom* etc. They

¹⁸ Home Department, Judicial Proceedings, National Archives, 19, August 1882, No, 1032, p.7.

¹⁹ Mahalingam, T.V., (ed), Manuscript, Vol.I, Madras, 1972, p.147.

²⁰ South Indian Inscriptions, Vol. V. Nos. 238, 283.

built the marriage pandal only inside the courtyard of their houses; they were, not allowed to decorate the pandal with a white saree. During the *pattana* pravesam, the procession of the bridegroom in the street, they were prevented from using white horses and umbrellas and were compelled to use red or black horses and umbrellas.²¹ They were not permitted to use the conveyance called *tair* or chariot to carry the corpse to the burning ground. Further they were prohibited from fixing the five *tambauls* or brass chembus and white cloths in the *tair*. They could use only *chaindy* or gaykundy.

The concerted attempts of the Kammalas and the Nadars to avail the banned privileges resulted in regular confrontations between the two hostile factions led by the Maravas and the Nadars. It became a common feature in the districts of Madurai and Ramnad where the artificers and cultivators commanded much influence due to their numerical strength.²²

The society in the Sethupathi region was broadly based on caste system. It was divided in to Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities. The higher castes were socially, communicably, and politically more privileged. The people of the lower ranks of the social ladder were considered inferior and weaker. The hierarchy in the caste system was the result of the felling off the superiority and inferiority of occupation. In other words the rank of any caste a shigh or low depends on whether the caste belong to an advanced or backward stage of culture. What ever is the origin

²¹ Professor A.P. Ibrahim Kanju Felicitation Volume, India, in the Eighteenth Century, Trivandrum, 1981, pp. 78-79.

²² Proceedings of the Board of Revenue, vol. 161, pp. 7030. Letter from the Collector of Ramnad to Edward Saunders, President of the Board.

of the caste system it evolved in to a very rigid and complex of social stratification as early as the end of the Vedic period.²³

Major castes and communities

Brahmanas

The Brahmanas in any part of India and at any point of time were considered to be very holy and noble. They enjoyed a status equal to the priestly order of the Jewish religion. One was not expected to kill a brahmana and it was considered as one of the *pachamaha patakas* (five great crimes).²⁴ Brahmins had great influence not only in region but also speculated place called *agraharam*.

The *agraharamas* separated the area and around the temples. The Brahmins due to their charam²⁵ accepted neither dish nor water from the low caste Hindus. In Brahmins there were two groups namely Saivites and Vaishnavites. The Saivites are the followers of Advaita philosophy expounded by Sankarachariyar in the 8th century A.D.²⁶ The Vaishnavites Brahmins were divided into two sects called Ayangars and Mathva and other were called Gurukkal and Nambiyar. Among the Vaishnavites there are three kinds those who are the followers of Chaitanya, Ramanuja and Madhavacharya. The Vaishnavas are two district groups of the Vadagalais (northerners) and the Tengalais (southerners). They are easily distinguished by the mark on their foreheads.²⁷ The Brahmins were also in charge of the temples as priests. There was a cadre among the Brahmanas and each one according to his educational

²³Rig veda was quoted: From the face of Prajapathi (Viratpurusha) came the Brahmins: from the arms arose the Kshatriyas: from the thighs sprang the vai yas: and from the feet the sudras. Edgar Thurston and Mr. Rengachari, K., Caste and Tribes of South India, Vol. I, p.267.

²⁴Lord Siva had cut the fifth head of brahma, a Brahman and acquired brahmahatti (crime of killing a brahmana) and had to suffer very much.

²⁵Acharam means religious rituals practice by the Brahmins.

²⁶Rajaram Rao, T. Manual of Ramnad Samasthanam, Madurai, 1891, p.29.

²⁷Ramaswami, A., Tamilnadu District Gazetteers Ramanathapuram, 1972, p.152.

status got an appointment in the temple. From the cook to the high priest, most offices in temples went to the Brahmanas. The Hindus in their family functions invited the Brahmanas to perform ceremonies known as *samskaras*.²⁸

There were ritual purificatory ceremonies from birth to death. From the very formation of a child in the mother's womb, the ceremonies started. After the birth of a child there was a house warming ceremony. At the school going age the pupil received his master's blessings and was invested with the seared thread, called *yajmopavita*. All *dvijas* (twice born) were expected to perform the *samskaras*. At the time of marriage and death and the obsequies, the Brahmana was invited to perform the rituals, uttering the vedas and other mantras, prescribed for each ritual like *Garbhadhana* for conception; *Pum saravana*, to be get a male child; *Simantonnayana*, to ensure safety of the child in the womb; *Cudkarma*, tonsure; *Upanayana*, invest with the sacred thread; *Vivaha*, marriage and *Antyesti*, funeral ceremonies.

The Brahmins thought that they constituted a small percentage of the population who occupied a conspicuous position in the Ramnad region. They were the most privileged people of the Sethupathi's kingdom. They wielded great influence right from the ancient time down to the period of Sethupathis.

The Brahmins enjoyed royal patronage all along the period.²⁹ The Brahmins held many positions of power and influence. They were temple priests, rajagurus, army commanders and ministers. During the 17th and 18th centuries most of the Dalavoyas of the Nayaks were Brahmins and the most famous among them and Narasappaiya in the reign of Queen Mangammal.³⁰ Ramappiayan acted as chief of the

²⁸Basham, A.L., The Wonder that was India, Calcutta, 1971, pp.160-166.

²⁹Kamal, S.M., Sethupathi Mannar, Varalaru, (Tamil) Ramanathapuram, 2003, p.57.

³⁰Letter of Fr. Peter Marling to Fr. Gobien at Aoor dated 11th December, 1700.

army of Thirumalai Nayak and defeated Sethupathi Sadaikkan of Ramnad.³¹ Ramappaiyan fought many battles and brought victory in all fronts. The Brahmins commanded great respect and authority in the politics as well as society.³² Muthu Ramalinga Sethupathi appointed Krishna Aiyangar to the small *pradani* post of the Ramnad region.³³

In the Ramnad region Brahmins were much respected for their long tradition of learning and their scholarship in Vedas. The Sethupathis had scholarship in Vedas. The Sethupathis were devout followers of Saivism. So they held the Brahmins in high esteem as ritual heads and they considered Brahmins as indispensable for performing all the rituals and ceremonies. They had kept themselves aloof in order to be distinct by their different pattern of speech, dress and diet. The Brahmins had social and religious observances which distinguished from all other classes such as prohibition of widow marriage, and prohibition of concubinage. They were richly endowed by Sethupathis with villages. All the Sethupathis in-variably made donations in the form of land to the Brahmins. Those who performed religious functions in Rameshwaram temples were called Tamil Aiyar and Pancha Desa Brahmins.

They were called Pancha Desa Brahmins as they had come from five regions Andhra, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra and Konkanam. There were Maratta Brahmins; who exercised important rights in Rameshwaram Ramanathaswamy temple. Usually the Maratta Brahmins daily conducted pooja for five times in Ramanathaswamy temple. Famous Maratha Brahmins are Sankara Kurukal, Raghunatha Kurukkal, and Eswara Kurukal. The Tamil speaking Brahmins who were called Dravid Brahmins were the earliest settlers of the Ramnad area. In 1772, there

³¹Nelson, J.H., The Madura Country a Manual, Madras, 1868, Part III, p. 128.

³²Mahalingam, T.V., Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagara, Part-III, 1975, p.121.

³³Monoharan, Mee., Kilvan Sethupathi, Sivagangai, 1983, p.42.

were 512 Brahmins working in Rameshwaram Temple. Muthuramalinga Sethupathi granted nearly 30 villages to the Brahmins in order to carry out repair work in Rameshwaram, Thiruchuli, Kamuthi and at other temple.³⁴

Vellalar (or) Pillai

The Vellalars are the great farmer caste of the Tamil country and they are strongly represented in every Tamil District. The word Vellalan is derived from Vellanmai and Vellamtanmai. The term *vellam* means water, *anmai* management meaning cultivation and tillage.³⁵ Vellalar stands for the cultivator of the soil they were one of the Tamil agricultural communities. They were peace loving and were also called Pillais and known for keeping accounts. Some others called themselves Mudaliars. Vellalars are exclusively the inhabitants of the Tamil or Dravida country. In religious life of the Tamil or Dravida country they came next to the Brahmin.³⁶ Accounts at least the seventh and eighth centuries A.D one such settlement in the state is described in the Tekkattur Palm leaf manuscript thus. Adonadai Chakravarthi brought these Vellalar with him from Conjeevaram to the Chola territory, and Ugraperu Valudi, the Pandya king selected 48,000 good families and imported them from east Conjeevaram and settled them in Pandyaland.³⁷

They were an ancient people and commanded much influence under the Cholas.³⁸ The Colanadu territory occupied by the Vellalars was called Konadu or the land of the king, and the Pandya territory the *kanadu* or forest land. They were divided into several groups such as Thondaimandala Vellalar, Cholamandala Vellalar, Pandyamandala Vellalar, Nancilnattu Vellalar and soon. The Saiva Vellalars

³⁴Ramaswami, A., Tamilnadu District Gazetteers, Ramanathapuram, 1972, p.98.

³⁵Stuart, H.A., Madras Census Report, 1891.

³⁶Rajaram Ayyar, K.R., Manual of the Pudukottai State, Pudukottai, Vol – II, part I, p.547.

³⁷Venkatrama Ayyar, K.R., Manual of the Pudukottai State, Vol – II, Part I, 1940, p.547.

³⁸Subbarayalu, Y., Fall of the Cola Empire, seminar paper, AVC college, Mayiladuthurai, 1995.

abstained from taking in toxicating liquors and meat. They never had the custom of remarrying widows and worshipping village gods. They followed Saivism mostly, and in order to equate themselves with the Brahmins, they Sanskritized local gods like Murugan into Brahminical Subramaniya. Some of them professed Vaishnavism. In the villages they lived side by side with the Brahmins.³⁹ The Vellalars were classified undersized heads in the Ramnad region. First the Pandi Vellalars are to be met within the Ramnad and Pallimadam region. The Pandi Vellalars are sub divided into the Karkattas or Karaikatu Vellalars.⁴⁰

Then the Arumbukattu Vellalars inhabited in a portion of the Rajasinga Mangalam region. Arumbukattu, the name indicates Vellalaras with wreaths of the aram flower, which is one of the decorations of Siva. There were marriage ceremonies for the village. The two rivers which bound this district on the north and south are rigid limits to the travels of the women, who are on no pretext allowed to cross them.⁴¹

Kodikal Vellalars were found throughout the Sethupathi region. The Sembunattu Vellalaras were living in the Ramnad Mudukulathur, Kamuthi and Rajasinga Mangalam and chiefly held the post of village accountants. The Kurumbu and Malaikuthy Vellalars inhabited in some portions of the Hanumanthagudi region. Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi (1711-1725) invited efficient accountants of the Vellala caste from Madurai to Ramnad region.⁴² They maintained revenue accounts. This testifies to their ability in maintaining and involvement in the administration of this region.

The Vellalars played a vital role in the administration of the Ramnad kingdom. Ramalingam Pillai (1729-35), Damodaram Pillai, Pichai Pillai, Velayutham Pillai,

³⁹Pate, H.R, Madras district Gazetteers, Tinnevely, Vol., I, 1917,p. 137.

⁴⁰Edgar Thurston and Rangachari,K., Vol, VII, op.cit., p.375.

⁴¹Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K., Vol., VIII, op.cit., p.377.

⁴²Thiruvengkatachari, S., The Sethupathis of Ramnad, Karaikudi, 1959, p.46.

Muthaiah Pillai, Sangaram Pillai, Muthu Irulappa Pillai and Katha Muthukumara Pillai were the Pradhanis from 1763-1795 Sethupathi region. The main occupation of Vellalars was agriculture; however they did not involve themselves in agriculture but carried out cultivation with the help of the hired servants. They did not have agriculture as their occupation but served as accountants, merchants, shop keepers and some government servants.⁴³ In Sethupathis region they were positioned as *karnams* who were the most powerful village officers. They were paid in kind during the times of harvest. Vellalars were the most literate people. This community had produced great poets like Ramanathapuram, Mudukulathur Sadavadanam, Saravanaperumal Kavirayar, Thriupuvanam Kandasami Pulavar, Sirukampai Sarkarai Pulavar, Parathaivayal MuthukuttiPulavar, Veerai Aasu Kavirayar etc.who all belonged to Sethupathi region.⁴⁴

Mukkulathor

As per tradition it was believed that once upon a time Rishi Gautama left his house to go abroad on business. Devendra taking advantage of his absence debauched his wife and three children were born. When the rishi returned one of the three hid himself behind a door and as he thus acted like a thief he was hence forward called Kallan. Another got up a tree, and was therefore called Maravan from Maram a tree, whilst the third stood on the ground and faced and therefore he was called Ahamudeiyan.⁴⁵ So the three related communities are known as Mukkulatthor (triple caste or lineage) and are related to one another.

The Sethupathis of Ramnad hailed from the Mukkulathor community. They were treated as Thevar and commanded the most prominent and significant position.

⁴³Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K., Vol., VIII, op.cit., p.371.

⁴⁴Ramaswami, A., op.cit., pp. 740-742.

⁴⁵Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K., op.cit., Vol., V, 1975, p.23.

The Mukkulathor community comprises the Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar social groups that share a common myth of origin and claim to have once been members of various ancient South Indian dynasties.

The term *Thevar* "literally means celestial beings or divine-natured people" and *Mukkulathor* means "three clans united together". The three constituent communities of Agamudayar, Kallar and Maravar. The three groups traditionally each believe themselves to be superior to their fellow Mukkulathors.⁴⁶

While they share a common mythological ancestor, the three communities also claim ancestral differences. The anthropologist Susan Bayly notes that both the Kallar and Maravar communities are relatively new caste entities. Both names were originally granted to people as titles by poligars (local chieftains) but the holders were not exposed to caste-defining influences such as Brahmanic Hinduism, the concept of varna and practices such as endogamy until the late 18th century. She says that the claims of distinct caste status "were clearly not ancient facts of life in the Tamil Nadu region. Insofar as these people of the turbulent poligar country really did become castes, their bonds of affinity were shaped in the relatively recent past".⁴⁷

Bayly notes that the Kallar and Maravar identities as a caste, rather than as a title, "... were clearly not ancient facts of life in the Tamil Nadu region. Insofar as these people of the turbulent poligar country really did become castes, their bonds of affinity were shaped in the relatively recent past". Prior to the late 18th-century, their exposure to Brahmanic Hinduism, the concept of varna and practices such as endogamy that define the Indian caste system was minimal. Thereafter, the evolution as a caste developed as a result of various influences, including increased

⁴⁶Muthulakshmi,R. Female Infanticide, Its Causes and Solutions. Discovery Publishing, 1997, pp. 11–13.

⁴⁷Bayly, Susan, Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 61.

interaction with other groups as a consequence of jungle clearances, state-building and ideological shifts. There after, the evolution as a caste developed as a result of various influences, including increased interaction with other groups as a consequence of jungle clearances, state-building and ideological shifts.⁴⁸

The Mukkulathor communities live mostly in central and southern areas of Tamilnadu, such as Madurai, Theni, Dindigul, Sivagangai, Pudukottai, Ramanathapuram, Thanjavur, Thiruvarur, Nagapattinam, Tiruchirapalli and Thirunelveli. Although the Mukkulathor own significant amounts of land, the sociologist Hugo Gorringer noted in 2005 that "their educational and economic achievements have been negligible", with many being small farmers or agricultural labourers.^[6] The community has mostly been given the status of Backward Class (BC) by the Government of Tamil Nadu, although some subgroups are omitted. They are mostly listed as Other Backward Classes (OBC) by the National Commission for Backward Classes.⁴⁹

Maravars

The Maravars claim descend from Guha or *kuha*, Rama's boatman, who rowed him across to Ceylon. According to the legend Rama promised Guha that he would come back at a fixed time. When he failed to return Guha made a fire, whereon to burn himself to death. Hanuman, however prevented him from committing suicide and assured him that Rama on learning what Guha had done called him Maravan.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Bayly, Susan, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 39.

⁴⁹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

⁵⁰Rathnam, K., *Thenninthiya Kulangalum kudikalum*, Vol., V, 2003, p.24.

The Maravas are referred to in the Sangam literature as warriors and army chiefs.⁵¹ The Maravars constituted the bulk of the population. Kanaka Sabai Pillai stated that they were a branch of the Nagas.⁵² They formed the chief inhabitants of the Sethupathi region and perhaps the oldest caste in the country are now a days only about half as numerous as the Vellalars, where areas four or five hundred years ago they must have been by far the most numerous, as they were undoubtedly the most powerful of all the castes in the Pandya country. History shows clearly that the kings of Ramnad in the seventeenth century held a very good position amongst the potentates of the south.

Muthukrishnappa Nayak restored the Marava territory to the ancient line of Sethupathi in 1605. He is credited with the foundation of the dynasty of the Sethupathi of Ramnad. The ancestors of the present Raja of that place, who were given a considerable slice of territory in the Marava country on condition that they suppressed crime and protected pilgrims journeying to Rameshwaram through that wild and inhospitable region.⁵³ Muthukrishnappa Nayak who wanted to control the Portuguese legally recognized Sadaika Thevar, the local chief as Sethupathi in Ramnad region. They had their own tribal leaders under whom they served as kings. By virtue of their military prowess they became turbulent and powerful.⁵⁴ The Marava chieftains were absorbed in to the prevailing feudal structure. They were given land rights with the condition of wartime contributions.

According to the Marava Jathi Varnam there were seven sub divisions among the Maravas.⁵⁵ They were divided into seven endogamous groups, (1) Sembu Nattu

⁵¹Kadhirvel, S., op.cit., p.6.

⁵² Kanaka Sabai Pillai, op.cit., p.41.

⁵³Francis, W., Madurai District Gazetteer, 1906, p.45.

⁵⁴Siranjeevi, N., Sethupathi Varalaru, 1981, p.11.

⁵⁵MJLS, Vol.IV, p.354.

Maravars, (2) Kondayan Kottai Maravars (3) Appanurnattu Maravars, (4) Agata Maravars (5) Oriyar Maravars (6) Uppu Kottai Maravars and (7) Kuruchi Kattu Maravars.

Sethupathi rulers hailed from the Sembu Nattu Maravar branches. There were Marikka Kilai, Picchakilai, Tondaman Kilai, Sitrama Kilai, Thanicha Kilai, Karuputhura Kilai, Katra Kilai sub sects among the Sembu Nattu Maravars.⁵⁶ Within the same *kilai* they were strictly forbidden to get married as the members were considered as sisters and brothers.

Kondayam kottai Maravars are divided into six sub tribes as they call them trees. Each tree or *kothu* is divided into three *kilai* or branches. Those of the *kilai* belonging to the same tree or *kothu* are never allowed to marry. A man or woman must marry with one of a *kilai* belonging to another tree than from his or her own being that of his or her mother, and not of the father. But marriage is not permissible between those of any two trees or *kothus*. There are some restrictions.

Pepper vine kothu divided into Viramudithanginam, Sedharand Semanda kilai betal. Betelvine kothu divided into Agastyar, Maruvidu and Alakhiya Pondiyan Kilai. Coconut kothu divided into Vaniyan Vettuvan and Natai Vendar Kilai. Arecanut kothu divided into Sangaran, Sadachi and Pichi Pillai Kilai. Palmyra kothu was divided into Akhili, Lokhamurti and Jambhuvar kilai.

The Sembunattu Maravars occupied the territory from Arantangi to Ramanthapuram. The two ruling houses of Ramnad and Sivagangai belonged to this group. The eastern part of Ramnad country and the western part of Tirunelveli country and also settlements in eastern and the southern parts of the same country were mostly occupied by the Kondayankottai Maravars. Appanur Nattu Maravar,

⁵⁶Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K., op.cit., Vol., V, p.32.

AgataMaravar, Oriyar Maravar, Uppukottai and Kuruchi Kattu Maravar were found scattered in Ramnad region.⁵⁷ Although the marriage ceremonies were almost the same for all the Maravars mentioned above, there were differences in the use of *tali*. The Sembunattu Marvar used a single *tali* and a few *pavalam*. The Kondayankottai Maravar used big cubic size *tali* and Uppukottaai Maravar and Kuruchi Kattu Maravar use only *pavalam* and the rest only a yellow thread.⁵⁸

The religion of the Maravars was mostly Saivism, but they also worship with zeal and fervour their peculiar deities of Karupana samy and Bhadrakali, Madurai Veeran and others which they habitually propitiate with offering of liquor, flesh and fruits. And they themselves eat flesh and drink liquor in direct opposition to the precepts of the Saiva faith. Their customs differ fundamentally from those of other Hindus in many important matters including the treatment of the widows. The wives who could not agree with their husband's procured divorce and got the privilege for remarriage.

It was customary for the widows of the Sethupathis and the Sembunattu Maravas generally to practice sates. The orthodox Maravar of Ramnad to wear the hair very long. With the exception of the chiefs, their women lengthen the opertures in their ear lobes to the extent of several inches by hanging in them wonderfully large and heavy metal ornaments. H.A. Stuart writes that there are no ceremonies connected with birth. A woman is considered as polluted for ten days after her confinement at the expiry of which time there is a peculiar ceremony and a feast to relatives. But those who are too poor to afford those ceremonies content themselves with purifying those by sprinkling the urine of cows about the premises the dead are either burnt or buried. The female relatives of the deceased put rice in the mouth of the corpse

⁵⁷Kadhirvel, S., op. cit., p.10.

⁵⁸Ibid.,p.9.

before it is removed from the house and at the burning ground the same service is performed by other near relatives. The son or other person most closely related to the deceased draws water in a pot, walks round the funeral pyre three times and then breaks the pot. Afterwards all who attended bathe in a stream or elsewhere. On the next day the bones and ashes are thrown in the sea or river.

Agambadias or Agamudayars

Agamudaiyars were one among the Mukulathor community. They were very closely connected with the Maravars by descent and they also resemble them most closely in appearance habits and customs. The chiefs of the Maravars are accustomed to marry Agamudaiya woman. Of the children born of such marriages the males must marry Agamudaiya females and belong to their wives caste, whilst the females must marry Maravars and belong to their husband's caste.⁵⁹ The ordinary agnomen or titular name of an Agamudaiyan is Servaikaran. The Agamudaiyans are a little less numerous than the Maravans as they are inferior to them in estimation. They are said to be divided into Aivalinattan Agamudaiyan, Malainadu Agammudaiyan, Kottaipattu Agamudaiyan, Rajakulam Agammudaiyan, Rajavasal Agamudaiyan. The Agamudaiyars are Saivites. Of the three castes Kallars, Maravars and Agamudaiyars the last are said to have alone been greatly influenced by contacts with Saivism. In rank among Mukklathors the Agamudaiyars were in third position. Their religious belief consists of worshipping various minor deities as Aiyanar, Pidari and Karuppanasamy.

These gods are worshipped with great fear and zeal. In their manners and customs they closely follow the Vellalars. They engaged Brahmin priests for their birth, marriage and death ceremonies like Vellalars. Kattaya Thevar alias Muthu

⁵⁹Nelson, J.H., The Madura Country a Manual, Madras, 1868, p.42.

Vijaya Raghunatha Sethpathis Pradani Vairavan Servai were great administrators.⁶⁰ Vellayan Servai Karar served as a successful Dalavoy for four Sethupathis period in 1736-1763 Ramnad region. Vellayan Servai was king maker. His bravery had popularity in Madura country.⁶¹ Agamudaiyars are divided on the basis of geographic and economic considerations. They remained with their primitive agriculture, subsistence living and backed in socio- economic betterment.

Kallars

The Kallars are mentioned in the Sangam classics as a fearless people who lived originally in the north most borders of the Tamil country about Tiruvenkadam (modern Tirupati) and as far south as Kanchi (Conjeevaram) in Tondaimandalam.⁶² Their migration ultimately overturned the Tondaimandalam first Colamandalam next and a considerable part of the Pandyamandalam. The Kallars were numerically the important and ethnologically perhaps, the most interesting of all the caste in the Sethupathis region. The word kallara means of thief or robber. Kallars got first place in position which was evident from a Tamil proverb *Kallan Maravan Kanathathor Agamudaiyar Mella Mella Vallalan Aanaan*.⁶³ The Kallars formed an important and strategic section of the armies of the Tamil kings and profession than agriculture and supported a larger population.

The Kallar (or *Kallan*, formerly spelled as Collieries) are one of the three related castes of southern India which constitute the Mukkulathor confederacy. The Kallar, along with the Maravar and Agamudayar, constitute a united social caste on

⁶⁰Manoharan, Mee., op.cit., p.135.

⁶¹Ibid., p.135.

⁶²Ahananuru, 62, 83, 209, 311, 159, 342, 393.

⁶³Eugene Irschick., Tamil Revivalism in the 1930'S, Madras, 1986, p.60.

the basis of parallel professions, though their locations and heritages are wholly separate from one another.

Kallar is a Tamil language word meaning *thief*. Their history has included periods of banditry. Other proposed etymological origins include "black skinned", "hero", and "toddy-tappers".⁶⁴ The anthropologist Susan Bayly notes that the name, as with that of Maravar, was a title bestowed by Tamil poligars (warrior-chiefs) on pastoral peasants who acted as their armed retainers.⁶⁵ The majority of those poligars, who during the late 17th and 18th-centuries controlled much of the Telugu region as well as the Tamil area, had themselves come from the Kallar, Maravar and Vaduga communities. **Kallar** is synonymous with the western Indian term, *Koli*, having connotations of thievery but also of upland pastoralism. According to Bayly, **Kallar** should be considered a "title of rural groups in Tamil Nadu with warrior-pastoralist ancestral traditions".⁶⁶

Among the traditional customs of the Kallar noted by colonial officials was the use of the "collery stick" (Tamil: valai tadi, kallartadi), a bent throwing stick or "false boomerang" which could be thrown up to 100 yards (91 m). Writing in 1957, Louis Dumont noted that despite the weapon's frequent mention in literature, it had disappeared amongst the Piramalai Kallar.

The Kallars, along with the Nadars and Thevars, traditionally practised a Tamil martial art variously known as *adi murai*, *chinna adi* and *varna adi*. In recent years, since 1958, these have been referred to as Southern-style Kalaripayattu, although they are distinct from the ancient martial art of Kalaripayattu itself that was historically the style found in Kerala.

⁶⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>

⁶⁵Bayly, Susan, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, pp. 61-65.

⁶⁶<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>.

They migrated from north Tamilakam in Kanchipuram area and settled down in the southern parts namely Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Thanjavur and Thirunelveli regions.⁶⁷ The Kallars divided into Meloornadu Kallars and Kilnadu Kallars.⁶⁸ But they are divided into ten main endogamous sub divisions, which are territorial in origin. They are called Menadu, Melur nadu, Sivakudinadu, the Vellalur nadu, Mallakottai nadu, Paganerinadu, Kandramanickam nadu or Kunnankottai nadu, Kandadevi, the Puramalai nadu, the Tennilainadu and the Palayanadu. These sections are further subdivided in to exogamous sections called *vaguppus*. They chiefly inhabit some portion of the Hanumanthangudi area in Ramnad region, during the period of the Sethupathis they served under them as army chiefs. During the period of Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi hearing of the prowess of the Kallars chiefs, the rulers of Tondaiman in Pudukottai region sought their service. Raghunatha Raya Tondaiman and his brother Namanathondaiman engaged them in the military services.⁶⁹

The Kallar were traditionally a non-vegetarian people, though a 1970s survey of Tamil Nadu indicated that 30% of Kallar surveyed, though non-vegetarian, refrained from eating fish after puberty. Meat, though present in the Kallar diet, was not frequently eaten but restricted to Saturday nights and festival days. Even so, this small amount of meat was sufficient to affect perceptions of Kallar social status

The Kallars are nominally Saivites, their chief deity is Alagarsamy the god of the great Alagarkoil, twelve miles to the north of the town of Madurai to this temple they make large offerings and the deity called Kallalagar had always been regarded as

⁶⁷Athamuthaiah, Pakaneri Nattu Makkal in Marapum Panpadum, Anatay Pathipakam, Tanjavur, 1980, p.45.

⁶⁸Baliga, B.S., Geographical and Statistical Memoir of Madurai and Dindugul, Madras Record Office, 1895, Vol. III, p.5-7.

⁶⁹Venkatrama Ayyar, K.R., Vol.II, op, cit., p.759.

their own peculiar deity.⁷⁰ The women of this community are accustomed to stretch to the utmost possible limit the lobes of their ears. This is effected by boring the ear lobes at any young age and inserting heavy pieces of metal, generally lead in the apertures. Their manner of observing ceremonies connected with child birth is remarkable and interesting. On the occasion of the first menstrual period the Kallars observe pollution for seven or nine days. A ceremony is generally held on the seventh month of pregnancy, when the husband's sister prepares 'Pongal'. The pregnant woman sits on a plank, and the rice is waved before her. She then stands up and bends down, while her sister in law pours milk from a betel or pipal leaf on her back. The ceremony ends with a feast. When a child is born in a family, the entire family observes pollution for thirty days. Among the Nattar Kallar, children are said to be named at any time after they are a month old. But among the Puramalai Kallars, a first born female child is named on the seventh day after the ear boring had been performed.

The ear boring ceremony is usually done for the girls before the age of maturity. As regards the disposal of the dead both burial and cremation are in vogue among the Kallars. The Kilnadu Kallars usually bury their dead. The Puramalai Kallars usually burn their dead, and it is said that when a pregnant woman dies with child, the child is taken out and placed along the side of her funeral pyre.

Nadars or Shanars

The word Shanar derives from *san* (a span) and *nar* fibre (or) string that is the noose, one span in length used by the Shanars in climbing palm trees.⁷¹ In the inscriptions of Raja Raja Chola (A.D.984-1013) toddy drawers are referred to as Iluvans. As per the dictionary in Pinagalandai during the 10th and 11th centuries the

⁷⁰Stuart, H.A., Madras Census Report, 1891, p.216.

⁷¹Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K., op.cit., Vol. III, pp.369-370.

names of the toddy drawer castes are Palaiyar, Tuvasar and Paduvar, to these the Chudamani Nikanda, a Tamil dictionary of the 16th centuries adds Saundigar.⁷² From Saundigar to Shanar it is not along step in the corruption of words. There is also a view that the word Shanar is derived from the Tamil word Sanror or Sanrar. The title of the southern Shanars is Nadan, or Nadir while in the north they are generally called Gramani.⁷³ The word is of recent origin and they are supposed to be of Ksatriya descent. Originally the Shanars and Ilavas were considered to be untouchables and polluting castes in view of their profession as toddy tappers.⁷⁴

They did not eat beef and refrained from drinking spurious liquor and did not allow their women folk to remarry.⁷⁵ Their women folks were not allowed to wear clothes to cover their breasts. They were also not allowed to enter Hindu temples. They were not permitted to draw water from public wells and walk on public roads. It seems there were two broad divisions among the Nadars, one lower and the other higher. In order to escape from the civil disabilities and social stigma, the Nadars took to trade and commerce and improved their economic status by resorting to Sanskritisation.⁷⁶ Sethupathis region Shanar caste was considered inferior to Sudras and superior to Parayas. Their main profession was to draw toddy from palm trees and sell it. They are found throughout the region, but they densely populated in and around Kamuthi, Pallimadam and Aruppukottai areas. They had all privileges till the rise of Vijayanagar. The Nadars after the defeat by Muslims, moved out to southern of Ramnad and Tirunelveli. The Nayaks and Mudaliyars illtreated them. During the

⁷²Ibid.,p. 368.

⁷³Ramaswamy, A., op.cit., p.137.

⁷⁴Petchiammal, K., Society and Economy under the Nayaks of Madurai, Ph.D., Thesis, Dec, 2002, p.103.

⁷⁵Jeenada, M., Socio and Political Trends under the rule of Madurai Nayaks Ph.D thesis, 2014, p.121.

⁷⁶Pillay.K.K., Studies in Indian History with Special Reference to Tamilnadu, 1979, pp.335-336.

Nayak period, one hundred Nadars were sold as slaves to Kilakarai Muslims who threw them in to the middle of the sea. Those who embraced Islam were spared.⁷⁷

During the Raghunatha Thirumalai Sethupathi's period in 1659 it was decided to grant 30 jaggery (*karrupatti*) to each of the Shanars for climbing the palm tree at the Maari Dhurga temple for the purpose of renovation at Ramnad.⁷⁸ Likewise in the Killavan Sethupathi's reign for the Mangai Nadhar's temple at Uttara kosa Mangai, all the taxes which were in vogue, were granted which included the taxes on Shanars too.⁷⁹ Though the Shanars were treated as of the lower class, the taxes paid by them were too used for the service of the deity. In addition to this, the King Sethupathi nominated the Shanars as members of the court to give justice.

It was during the reign of Muthu Kumara Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi a dispute on the basis of relationship between the Gurukals of Rameshwaram and those of the Ariya Maha Sabbai came to the court of the Raja Sethupathi. The Sethupathi asked the mediating group consisting of twenty members to enquire and grant justice. In the group Malayeri Nadar was placed to deal with the case.⁸⁰ Though the Shanars were looked upon as inferior people, the Rajas of Sethupathi did not treat them as inferiors. They were very conservative. Whenever they sent their children to school for the first time, they would conduct certain ceremonies at home for firstly making them write the alphabets and then only they would admit their children in the school. Besides for the boy who would attain the age of sixteen, the ritual of wearing a piece of cloth round the head called *urumakkattu* would be conducted. In case of death the

⁷⁷Rajayyan, K., History of Tamilnadu Past and Present, 1995, p.283.

⁷⁸Raghunatha Thirumalai Sethupathi, Allikulam Copper Plate, Ramanathapuram Devasthanam Office, 1659.

⁷⁹Raghunatha Thirumalai Sethupathi, Thiruuthrakosamangalam Copper Plate, Tamilnadu Government Archaeological Museum, Ramnad, (25.04.1678).

⁸⁰Muthukumara Vijaya Raghu Natha Sethupathi, Rameshwaram Copper Plate, Tamilnadu Government Archaeological Museum Ramnad, (18.01.1746).

Shanars used to bury those who were supposed to be dead. While burying the dead, they would keep the head facing the west and the foot towards the north. In some places the senior people would be buried in a sitting position with their faces facing the east. Though the brothers in a Shanar family would follow different methods in the worship of gods, they would always remain united. In the house in one room the worship would be made for the Lord Siva where as in the other room worship would be conducted for Jesus. Yet the people belonging to the community would always develop the habit of living united forever. Moreover it is remarkable to note that the people would observe the practice of worshipping Gods like Ayyanar, Petchiamman and Patrakali.

Idaiyars

The name Idaiyar is derived from Tamil word *idei* middle being a kind of intermediate link between the farmers and merchants. This community originally inhabited the lands between the hills and the arable lands the jungly plains suited for pasturage.⁸¹ The Idaiyar in the Sangam ages were supposed to inhabit the *mullai* (forest region) tract of land.⁸²

Idaiyars are one of the important communities in Sethupathi's region. This caste has many subdivisions (i) Kalkatti and Pasi Idaiyars (ii) Pendukkumekki Idaiyar (iii) Siviyan or Sivala Idaiyars (iv) Sangukatti Idaiyar (v) Semban Idaiyars (vi) Kaliyar Idaiyars. Kalkatti and Pasi idaiyars are so called from their custom of wearing sixteen glass beads along with their *tali*. The Semban Idaiyars took their name from *sambu* or Siva. Most of the members of this division put on the sacred ashes as a sectarian mark. The Kaliar Idaiyars took their name from the Kallars.

⁸¹Nelson, J.H., op.cit, p.60.

⁸²Raju Kalidos, History and culture of Tamils, 1989, p.59.

The Pendukkumekki Idaiyar denoted those who were subservient to their women. A man on marriage joins his wife's family and he succeeds to the property not as his father but of his father-in-law. Siviyan or Sivala Idaiyars, an occupational name meaning palanquin – bearer. The Sangukatti Idaiyars are those who tie the conch or chank shell. The Idaiyars who are called in many name as Aayar, Konar and Keethari, Idaiyars were cattle rearers both sheep and cow. Their proper occupation as herdsmen is confined to tending and milking cows and buffaloes as well as dealing in milk, butter and buttermilk and dealing with sheep or goats. Majority of the people live in villages, large members of them depend on agriculture. Now-a-days these communities claim to be of Yadava origin, so their communities claim a high social position due to the reason Lord Krishna was bought up by their caste. They consider Lord Krishna as their communal deity. Besides they have their family deities. The Idaiyars observe some peculiar customs in performing their marriages and funerals. Their funeral methods were mostly in Maravar style.

In the reign of Sethupathis the taxes paid by the idaiyars are called *idai vari* or the *geetharam*. It was during the period of Killavan Sethupathi alias Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi for the diety Perumal during the Aadi festivals, all the lands surrounding that place of Thiruppulani and the *idai vari* and all the taxes paid by the people were granted.⁸³ In the period of Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi for conducting the worship and, for making offering every day to the gods and for lighting the lamps and for conducting the festival as well all the various people living in Ramnad were

⁸³Vijaya Raghunatha Kilavansethupathi. Ramanusapperi Copper Plate, Tamilnadu, Archaeological Museum, Ramanathapuram, 1688, p.2.

ordered to pay a certain sum of money by the king. The Sivikai Idaiyars were also those who were included into the group of the people of Ramnad.⁸⁴

Chettiyars

The Chettiyar community people lived in Sethupathi's region conducted trade, commerce and money-lending business. Four types of Chettiyars lived in this region. Nattukottai Chettiyar (ii) Vaniya Chetti, (iii) Comati Chettiyars (iv) Manjaputha Chettiyars.

Nattukottai Chettiyar

Nattukottai Chettiyars emigrated to this Sethupathi region thousands of years ago from town of Kaveripattanam. They were living at Devakottai, Karaikudi, Sivagangai, Thirupattur, and Ponnamaravathi. They were called by another name Nagarathar. Nagarathar adopted town life and culture. They were wealthy money-lenders. They were trading and enterprising in Burma, Ceylon and another countries, they adopted business methods and organisation as European traders.

The Nattukkottai Chettiyas are divided into nine temples based divisions, (i) Ilayaththukudi, (ii) Maththur (iii) Vairavanpatti (iv) Iraniyur (v) Pillaiyar patti (vi) Nemam (vii) Iluppaikudi (viii) Suraikudi (ix) Velangudi. They mostly follow Saivism.

Vaniya Chettiyars

Vaniya Chettiyar's occupation was oil pressing and oil trade. They are lightning Nanthavillaku and oil kappu in temples. They use *chekku* to crush and extract oil from coconuts. Largest chekkus were found in Karaikudi near Sekkalai

⁸⁴Viajaya Raghunatha Sethupathi, Sakkangudi Copper Plate, Ramanathapuram, Kothanda Ramaswami Temple, 1715.

Kottai. Now it is called Sekkalai, one of the areas in Karaikudi.⁸⁵ During Sethupathi's period Vaniya Chettiyar paid the *chekku* tax.⁸⁶

Comati Chettiyar

Comati Chettis were of second stage in Hindu religion. They followed Brahminical rituals. The Comati Chettis were another Telugu group, engaged in merchandise. They were very frugal and even miserly. They worshipped Siva and Vishnu and the goddess called Kannika (virgin) Parameswari and built temples for her in Tamilnadu.

Manjaputha Chettiyar

Manjaputha Chettiyars lived in Ramnad region they used to sell jewels and precious stones and are found in all the important towns in this region.

Nattambadians or Uddaiyans

Nattaman means a man of the plains. Nattampadi is another form of Nattaman. Nattambadi are usually respectable cultivators. They immigrated into Ramnad region more than a century ago and they came from an increasing class of cultivators.⁸⁷ The Uddaiyars put on sacred threads at marriages and funerals and some of them have recently begun to wear them always. Nattaman women do not as a rule cover their breasts. The lobes of their ears are much distended and they tattoo their chins and cheeks in the Parayan fashion.

⁸⁵Kamal, S.M., op.cit, p.60-61.

⁸⁶Ramanusapperi Copper Plate, op.cit., p.2.

⁸⁷Rajaram Rao, T., op.cit, p.36.

Pattunulkarar or Sowrashtra

Pattunulkarans are a minority people in Sethupathi region. They are migrated from Maratha and Gujarath. Twelfth and thirteenth century during Madurai Nayaks period these people settled in Ramanathapuram and Paramakudi. They supported the Nayaks and Sethupathis. Sowrashtra people are skilful and industrious workmen and many of them have become very wealthy but their habits are very filthy.⁸⁸

They keep altogether aloof from other castes and live independently of general society speaking a foreign tongue and preserving intact the customs of the lands of their origin, Their main occupation in silk cloths, they weave and sell without the intervention of middleman, these people were considered very low in certain Tamil areas.

Kavaras and Vadugas

This class consists of principal subcastes, all speaking. Telugu with a large admixture of Tamil idioms and all settlers came from the Telugu country. Some subdivisions are (i) Kavara (ii) Golla, (iii) Reddi (iv) Kammava (v) Thottians or Kambalathar and (vi) Baliijas. They were mostly the followers of Vaishnavism in this region. These sub communities do not generally intermarry with one another. Some of the sub divisions live in the Sethupathi region.

Kavarei

The Kavareis are as a rule jealous of the purity of their caste and hold by common consent a place in the scale of castes superior to that of other Sudra castes excepting the pure Vellalars and Chettiars. They are found in many professions. The Kavareis are generally called as Naidus. They have got their own traditions which

⁸⁸Nelson, J.H., op.cit, p.87.

recognises them as the inhabitants originally of Venghi, the seat of the Eastern Chalukyas.⁸⁹

Reddies

The Reddies are purely an agrarian group of people speaking the Telugu dialect. They are reputed to be excellent for energetic, orderly in their behaviour of frugal habits at most ways respectable members of society. They lived principally in Sethupathi regions of Pallimadam, Kamuthi and Arupukottai area. They cultivate chiefly cotton and Punjai grains and thar than Nunjai crops.

Thottians or Kambalathar

They are the subdivision of Vadugas and speaking Telugu language. Thottians found employment under them and the poligars, as soldiers, peons and armed retainers. Some people deeply learned Theology and Astrology. Both men and women especially are addicted to the practice of magic and are on that count regarded with great awe by the population in general. This caste was called by another name “Kodangi Nayakkar”.

Rajus

The Rajus community came from Telugu region to Madurai during the Nayaks period. They mostly live in Rajapalayam and surroundings.⁹⁰ These people’s social relationship was confined within Rajapalayam itself. In religion they mostly followed Vaishnavities though a few followed Saivism. Their customs and manners are similar to those of Brahmins. Flesh eating is allowed for them.⁹¹

⁸⁹Ramaswami, A., op.cit, p.149.

⁹⁰Kamal, S.M., op.cit, p.129.

⁹¹Ramaswami, R., op.cit, p.150.

Kammalars

The Kammalars or the Artisan groups were known as Pancha Kammalars. The Kammalars were artisans and with royal patronage, they promoted the development of performing arts in the temples and fine arts in Sethupathi region. Kammalars are five divisions so called as Pancha Kammalar. They were known as the *pancha* (five) Kammalars; they are Tattan (Gold smith), Karuman (Brass smith), Tachan (Carpenter), means wood workers, Kaltachan (stonemason) and Kollan (Blacksmith). They took honorary titles such as Achari.⁹²

Some of them were well versed in the Vedas and Sastras and thus considered themselves Brahmins. They were well versed in Sanskrit and making temples and sculptures the Agamas and Silpasastras, which were written in Sanskrit only. They wore the sacred thread on Avani avittam days and did not eat non-vegetarian food in view of their creative profession.⁹³

Keikolans

Keikolans are by far the most numerous of the three. They are not skilful workmen and weave only coarse white cloths. They live in the areas of Abiraman and Chokalingapuram and other places.

Saliyans

They are little, if anything, more skilful. They weave chiefly coarse coloured cloths for women's wear. They are found in Pallimadam area in Sethupathi region.

⁹²Bahadur, K.P., Caste Tribes and Culture of India, Karnataka , Kerala, and Tamilnadu, Vol.4, New Delhi, 1978, p.15.

⁹³Lakshmi Narasu, P., A Study of Caste, Madras, 1922, p.8.

Saluppans

They weave only gunny-bas and the coarsest kinds of fabrics. These people chiefly inhabit in the southern area of this region.

The scheduled castes

Pallars

The word Pallar might have been derived from the word *pallam*.⁹⁴ They were employed only in agriculture. Their women were noted for their work in planting and weeding. Their huts form a small detached hamlet, the *pallacheri*, removed to considerable distance from the house of the respectable inhabitants. Pallars were a despised race and considered superior to Parayars. Sethupathi's period collected pallar tax called as *palvari*.⁹⁵ The headman of the Pallar is called Kudumbar. They are Saivites; they perform pujas to *grama devatas* (village deities). Formerly they also used to indulge in animal sacrifices.⁹⁶

Parayars

The name Parayars is derived from Tamil word *parai* means a drum.⁹⁷ The Parayars served as drummers at marriage, funerals and village festivals. Their place of dwelling was called *paracheri*.⁹⁸ They were employed as agricultural labourers, grave diggers, scavengers and informers of death news to relatives, burning corps, public announcement and decorating for village festival.⁹⁹ They were considered as people below Pallars. They were put too much humiliation. They were not allowed to walk in

⁹⁴Edgar Thurston, op.cit, Vol.V, 1975, p.473.

⁹⁵Raghunatha Kilavan Sethupathi, Kalathoor Copper Plate, Prof. Valli House Karaikudi.

⁹⁶Ramaswami, R., op.cit, p.154.

⁹⁷Arthurf.Cox., Madras District Manual : North Arcot, Vol.1., Madras, 1896, p.303.

⁹⁸Nelson, J.H., op.cit, p.75.

⁹⁹Nicholas. B.Dirks, The Hollow Crown Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom, New York, 1987, p.16.

the streets where high caste Hindus dwelled and not allowed to wear chappals, and their women were prohibited from using upper draperies.

Chakkiliars

Chakkiliars were also considered a servile community. They are the lowest among the Pallars and Parayars. They are dressers of leather and makers of slippers, harness and other leathern things. They are men of indescribably drunken and filthy habits and their moral standard was comparatively are very bad. They lived in and around Paramakudi and Mudukulathur in large numbers.¹⁰⁰

Fisherman or Paravars

Paravars or fisherman lived on the seacoast *karei* are also called *kareiyans*. They are usually called Sembadavans meaning Sivan Padavar the boat man employed by Lord Siva.¹⁰¹ They are Sembadavans if they fish in tanks and streams and Savalakarans if they fish in the sea. They were the earliest people who embraced Christianity. In 1536 Francis Xavier who worked mostly among Paravars converted some of them to Christianity.¹⁰² The Portuguese helped the Paravars to sever the bondage from the Muslims. For the protection given by the Portuguese, many of the Paravars became Christians and adopted Portuguese names along with their original names.¹⁰³ Another section of the Paravars was called Kadaiyar who worked in lime burning and they also undertook fishing. Some had settled down as agriculturists and others as hunters.

¹⁰⁰Ponnaiah. J.S., Research Studies in the Economic and Social Environment of the Indian Church, Madurai, 1938, p.38.

¹⁰¹Cornish, W.R., Report of the Census of the Madras Presidency, 1871, Vol.I, Madras, 1874, p.161.

¹⁰²Achilles Meersman, The Franciscans in Tamilandu, Switzerland, 1962, p.92.

¹⁰³Edgar Thurston, op.cit, Vol.VI, 1987, p.145.

Vannan

The Vannans are washer men, who wash for the respectable higher castes.

Puthara Vannan

Puthara Vannans are still of a lower caste as they wash for Pallans Paraiyars and other low castes.

Ambattans

The Ambattans shave the heads and bodies of the higher classes. The lowest classes have Ambattans among themselves.¹⁰⁴ The Ambattans are the Tamil barbers or barber-surgeons. The word is usually derived from the Sanskrit *amba* (near) he stands near to shave his clients or treat his patient is so called as ambattan.

Kusavan

Kusavans are potters, men proverbial for ignorance and stupidity and are despised accordingly.¹⁰⁵

Semman

The Semmans burn and sell lime for building purpose and works in the same region.¹⁰⁶

Melakaran

The Melakarans are musicians who are composed of several functions. Two types of *melams* (i) Temple and Marriage Melam (ii) Death and Karakatta Melam. Melakarans and Dasies are to be found in where there are important temples.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴Edgar Thurston, op.cit, Vol.I,1987, p. 32.

¹⁰⁵Nelson,J.H., op.cit, p.72.

¹⁰⁶Rajaram Rao,T., op.cit, p.46.

¹⁰⁷Rajaram Rao,T., op.cit, p.47.

Religion

Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are the three major religions of Sethupathi's religion. Hinduism is the principal religion in this region. The second principal religion of the region is Islam. The third principal religion is Christianity. The other religions including Jainism and Buddhism are having the small fractions of the population.

Hindus

The general structure, beliefs and customs of the Hindus of Sethupathi country do not materially differ from that of the Hindus in general. All Hindus who are non-Brahmins are either the followers of Saivism or Vaishnavism.¹⁰⁸

Saivism has a long history in the Marava country. During the period of the Pallavas, Saivism began to have deep roots in the Marava soil as evidenced by a number of Saivite temples that had been constructed.

Before the time a number of the Thevaram rhymes have been sung in praise of the deities in some of these temples. The shrines of Thiruvadanaï-Rameshwaram¹⁰⁹ and Kalaiyar Koil (Kannappar) are among these celebrated in the Thevaram rhymes. The temple at Thiruuttarakosamangai is celebrated in the rhymes of saint Manickavasagar. The Saivite Nayanmar Ilayankudi Maranayanar was native of Ilayandudi, which is in the heart of the Marava country.

Vaishnavism too, flourished in the Marava Country and the Vaishnavate temples received very great support from the ruling king from time to time. Three temples in the Marava Country have been celebrated by the Alvars, and they are the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.47.

¹⁰⁹ Rengacharya, K.V., To Po-graphical list of Inscriptions, p.1168.

Thirumayam, Tirukkottiar, and the Tirupullani temples, which even today attract thousands of pious devotees all through the years.

The middle class of Hindus has a tendency to adopt the customs; social as well as religious practices of the Brahmins. But the lower classes in addition to their general religion, worship their titular gods or demons such as Badrakali¹¹⁰Karuppana swamy and Mariamman.

Marriamman is extensively worshipped in the region. She is held in great veneration and is known as 'Amma' (mother) or Mahamai (a corruption of the word Mahamayi). They propitiate the deity with great fear that her wrath would result in the spread of epidemics. And vows are often taken to this goddess. Ayyanar, Draupathi and Muneswaran are the most popular village deities of the Sethupathi region.

The Muslims

The Muslims remained the second major community in Sethupathi region. Among the Muslims there is five principal divisions namely (i)Patan (ii)Syyed, (iii) sheiks, (iv) Lebbais or Rauttans¹¹¹and (v) Moghals. They Syyeds are regarded as the direct descendants of the Prophet. The Pathans are the descentents of Kutbuddin and his followers. The Sheiks are the descendants of the immediate friends and followers of Prophet. The Lebbais or Rauttars as they are more commonly called who are of mixed parentage being the descendants of Mohamadans and Hindus or aborigines. The Moghals are the desendants of Tartar chiefs who followed Tamerlane in India.

¹¹⁰Rajaram Rao, T. op.cit., p.47.

¹¹¹Ramaswami, A., op.cit, p.160.

Lebbais

The Lebbais are also a Muslim caste of partly Tamil origin.¹¹² They are the descendants of the early colonists from Arabia. They first settled along the sea coasts chiefly in Kilakarai, Devipatanam, Mandapam and pamban.

Arabs seem to have settled first on the Malabar Coast in the 9th century and then spread to the eastern coast and Ceylon. The mixed race consisting of the descendants of those Arab merchants are called Mapillas on the western coast.¹¹³

Most of the Lebbais are traders. Some are engaged in weaving mats and others in diving at the pearland chank fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar. There is still some trade connection between Kilakarai and the ports of Burma and Straits Settlements. It is carried on entirely by Muslims in native sailing vessels and large proportions of the Muslims of Kilakarai have visited Penang and Singapore.

The Marakayars

The word Marakayar is usually derived from the Arab, Meekab, a boat.¹¹⁴ In answer they pointed to their boats and pronounced the word marakab and they in consequence known to the Hindus as Marakayars or the people of the Marakan. According to another tradition the word Marakayar is derived from the words 'Marakalam' which means boat and 'rayars' which means kings. Since the people were successful sea-traders, they were called as Marakarayars and later the word got corrupted as Marakayar. They pioneered the maritime commercial activities. Some of the Marakayars at Kilakarai were so very rich that it is reported that Syed Kadir Marakayar (Sethakathi) assisted Kilavan Sethupathi with sufficient men and money to

¹¹²Tarachand, P., Influence of Islam on Indian Culture, Allahabad, 1946,p.33.

¹¹³Bishop Caldwell, R., op.cit, p.36.

¹¹⁴Aldorizzi, The Travels of Marco Polo, New Delhi,1994,p.324.

build the Ramnad fort, Ramalingavilasam. Most of the Marakayar ships and boats were kept in the ports of Devipattinam, Kilakarai, Mandapam and Pampan.

Christians

The Christian community formed the third major religious group in the Sethupathi region. Christianity is one of the biggest religions of the world. The religion owes its rise to Jesus of Nazareth in ancient Galilee (Palastin). It is the outgrowth of the life and work of Jesus Christ and centres around his personality.¹¹⁵ The Christian movement however soon expanded among non Jewish people and developed into an independent and well founded religion. Later in 1054 A.D. due to difference of opinion the Christians fell in to two groups i.e. the Greek Catholics and the Roman Catholics. Later in the 16th century the reformist movement gave rise to another group the Protestants.¹¹⁶

The Roman Catholic Mission is by far the oldest in the Sethupathi region dating as far back as the sixteenth century. Some of the oldest churches of this mission were established during the supremacy of the Portuguese over India at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholics are nearly the entire Tamil race and they are included among the foreign castes solely on account of their religion, which estranges them from their country men far more completely than would any difference of blood and color. Most of the lower classes of Hindus, chiefly living along the sea coast are the converts to the Roman Catholic faith. Closely associated with the Portuguese customs the Parava Christians of the Fishery Coast however exercised hardly any influence on the people in the neighbouring kingdom of

¹¹⁵Mathews, S., and Smith, G.B.A., Dictionary of Religion and Ethics, London, 1921.

¹¹⁶Ramaswami, A., op.cit, p.163.

Maravas of Ramanathapuram. Some of the Sethupathi rulers allowed to build churches and to undertake missionary activities.

Social Condition

Sati

The system called sati was practiced in the upper class in the society. The term 'sati' is derived from the Sanskrit word that literally means the chaste or virtuous wife practically it stands for the practices of a wife burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband.¹¹⁷ Many ancient people buried or burnt a man's widows, horses and other cherished possessions with his corpse, in order that he might have all that he loved and needed in the other world.¹¹⁸ Sethupathi region also had witnessed many cases of sati. This system was widely accepted and practised for two reasons. The wives always preferred to die before the death of their husbands and when their husband died during their life time they would commit sati.

A reason for this could be that, the widows were not able to tolerate the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the society. When Sethupathi ruler Kilavan Sethupathi died, his forty seven wives committed sati along with him. Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi daughter's two wives of Dhanda Thevar committed sati on the funeral pyre of their husband. Later on two choulities called Akkamadam and Thangachimadam were built in near Rameshwaram.

¹¹⁷Narain, V.A., Social History of Modern India, Delhi, 1972, pp.68-69.

¹¹⁸ Basham, A.L., The Wonder That Was India, New Delhi, 1989, p.188.

Devadasi System

Devadasi system became an inseparable institution in the Hindu society. It was very progressive during the medieval period under the cholas. The dancing girl attached to pagodas was called Devadasis.¹¹⁹

Endowments were made to the temples for the maintenance of the temple along with those of these Devadasis.¹²⁰ Mostly girls from kaikolas caste were dedicated to temples as Devadasis.¹²¹ Rameshwaram, Aruppukottai, Thiruchuly, Thirupullani, Thiruvadanaï, Kalaiyarkovil, Nattarasan Kottai temples Devadasi Isai vellalar womens¹²². It was said that some kallar girl out of compulsion by Vijaya Raghunatha Sethupathi became devadasis for having plundered the bullocks of Rajah.

The Rajah slew the men and made the Kallar woman as devadasis in Rameshwaram temple.¹²³ Their official duty was to dance and sing in the temple, twice a day. Sethupathi regime was also not free from the influence of devadasis system.

De-Britto

In 1649 that John Britto was born in a Christian family of the Catholics. His father remained as the viceroy of the king at Portugal. De-Britto was drawn towards self service even during his school days. So he joined in 1662 in the Thiru sabhai of Jesus to render the divine service of preaching the doctrines of Jesus every day. He came at the age of twenty seven to India to render the religious service. On 5th May 1686 he came to the Marava Nadu which was under the jurisdiction of the Sethupathi. He stayed at the town called Vellaikulam which was nearer to Kallal and he was

¹¹⁹Nelson, J.H., op.cit, p.79.

¹²⁰Pillai, K.K., The Suchindrum Temple, Madras, 1953, p.26

¹²¹Hutton, J.H., Caste in India, London,1951.

¹²²Kamal, S.M., op.cit, p.179.

¹²³Edgar Thurston and Rangachari, K.,op.cit.,Vol.II,p.59.

seriously engaged in propagating the religious principles. It was on 17th of July 1686, after he had finished his prayers, that he moved towards a place called Melamangalam which was about four kilometers on the way to Paganeri. There had been four members with him including a Brahmin who had been recently converted by him. On hearing about the religious conversion made by Britto under the order of the Kilvan Sethupathi, the Pradhani, with the Maravar army of soldiers arrested all the members with Britto.¹²⁴ He was brought to Paganeri and very severely subjected to punishment; a message came from the Raja Sethupathi to bring back Britto, who was partly in a state of death.¹²⁵ Britto was made to run fast without slippers on the rough roads towards the capital. After being taken there, he was put to prison at the horse stable and later was shut up in a dark cell.¹²⁶ Being brought up in front of the Sethupathi he went on arguing about the religion efficiently without giving up hope.

The Sethupathi listened to the religious principles narrated by Britto in detail. So the Kilavan Sethupathi was very much pleased to hear the talk of Britto. On seeing this, Pradhani of the Sethupathi thought how the mind of the Sethupathi might have been changed. In this state the Kilavan Sethupathi had also the habit of drinking and had married many numbers of wives. In order to prevent him from having the change of mind *pradhani* stated that Britto's religion was against him. Despite this Kilavan Sethupathi was ready to permit Britto to stay at any part of the country and he would never prevent him from worshipping his god and following his own religion. At the same time he stated that he would not permit him to preach the doctrines which were found to be impossible for his own people to accept and also if he tried hard to bring about the conversion in the minds of the people his heart would be removed from the body.

¹²⁴Seshadri, K., "The Sethupathis of Ramnad" (Doctoral Dissertation unpublished), 1976, p.53.

¹²⁵Joseph, C., Houpert., op.cit., p.56.

¹²⁶Henry Doering, From Royal Page to Martyr, p.80.

After being released from this state he returned to Portugal in 1687. Despite this his mind often moved towards India. In 1690 after undertaking a sea journey for a year, he reached Goa to undertake the religious mission in the Marava country; it was at this juncture that many numbers of people had changed their religion in Sethu Nadu. Dhanda Thevar a Siruvali palayakarar a relative of Sethupathi got his mind changed and converted himself to be a member of the Christian religion. He had five wives and the new religion insisted on his having only one wife and his treating all the other wives as his own sisters. His last wife was supposed to be Kilavan Sethupathi's sister's daughter. She was called Kathali Naatchiyar. And as such she was the daughter-in-law of the Raja Kilavan Sethupathi.¹²⁷ She informed sadly her uncle Sethupathi of what had happened to her because of the conversion of her husband. On hearing how her life was going to be lost, the king at once ordered that Britto should be brought to the prison. In 1693 Britto along with the other two converts were arrested at a place called Muni which was found to be nearer to Devakottai.

After being arrested Britto was brought to prison at Ramnad on the 11th of January in 1693. Just then Kilavan Sethupathi issued an order of exiling Britto. After he decided to send his own brother Udaya Thevar as the governor to Oriyoor,¹²⁸ he sent secretly a letter to Udaya Thevar to chop off the head of Britto. Even after Britto being brought to Oriyoor it took a long time for him to get murdered because the wife of Udaya Thevar belonged to the Christian religion. She did not like Britto to be brutally murdered. It was under the order of Kilavan Sethupathi, received by the minister Murugappapillai that the body of Britto was chopped into pieces on the holy Wednesday and thrown to crows and eagles. His head and foot were made to be hung in front of the fort. Though Kilavan Sethupathi was considered to be the efficient ruler,

¹²⁷Pillai, K.K., Tamilaga Varalarum Makkal Panpaadam, p.448.

¹²⁸Rajaram Rao, T., op.cit, p.146.

the cruel judgment passed by him was supposed to be the black and a unhealthy symptom of his rule.It was during the regime of Vaduganadhar in 1735 the place where Britto lost his life, a holy church was built and every Wednesday was considered to be a holy day for carrying out the worship of him and it continues till now.¹²⁹

¹²⁹Henry Doering, op.cit, p.128.