CHAPTER – VI

THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS AND CASTE ASSOCIATION

The emergence of community consciousness and the formation of caste associations in the late nineteenth century heralded a new era of social transformation in colonial Tamil Nadu. Caste system as an indigenous institution was an integral part of the Indian society from time immemorial. Caste was so tacitly observed and accepted completely that it functioned as the unit of social action everywhere. There were about three thousand main castes, each culturally distinct, endogamous, traditionally sharing a common occupation, rituals and a particular position in the localised hierarchy of caste ranking. Generally, it functioned as an undifferentiated unit. Each caste was characterised by a number of attributes significant to its position in ritual ranking. However, crucial to our study is not the social function of the caste, but the political incarnation of caste association and community consciousness, which paved the way for the genesis of communal and national movement, based on supra-local-cultural-ethnic identification.

Caste associations were the logical outcome of the material reality of colonial Tamil Nadu. Introduction of colonial modernisation, along with administrative paraphernalia, impelled the local groups to organise themselves on community lines. The newly developed transport and communication facilities, proliferation of western political ideas and dissemination of English education created a social consciousness among the caste intellectuals to elevate their social status through traditional and modern means. However, central to the issue was the colonial interference in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the people in various ways, which resulted in the proliferation of the group organisations and ‘communal patriotism’.

The establishment of the centralised bureaucracy, the introduction of modern administrative system along with the imposition of social categories on the people for

---

colonial convenience, hampered the smooth functioning of the cooperative village economy.\footnote{R. G. Baliga, \textit{Studies in Madras Administration: Nationalism and Independence in Madras}, vol. 1, Madras, 1951, pp. 13-15.} Increasing urbanisation with the unfolding of new economic opportunities offered by colonial state weakened the communal ties and caused social dislocation in the rural areas. Moreover, Brahmins entry into the government service on a large scale, with the monopoly of education, posed a threat to the power equilibrium of the society.\footnote{Marguerite Ross Barnett, \textit{The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India}, Princeton, 1976, pp. 33-35.} On the whole, the active intervention of colonial state in the rural life necessitated the socially undifferentiated caste groups to pool their resources on communal lines. Primordial discontent arising out of 'social dislocation' and 'political suffocation' always engaged them in the process of acquiring an appropriate place for its members.\footnote{Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays}, New York, 1973, pp. 274-76.} Many aspiring caste groups, pointing to their fallen status, urged their members to assert their rights. These caste groups, taking recourse to their traditional-fraternal affinity in the old social order, made an assiduous attempt to reap the political and economic benefits ushered in by the colonial modernisation.\footnote{Eugene F. Irschick, \textit{Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s}, Madras, 1986, pp. 16-17.}

Caste was undoubtedly an unaltered feature of the Indian society. Prior to colonial rule in South India, it never functioned as an over arching association embracing all members of a particular caste. Traditionally, the castes of localised community was hierarchically ranked and functionally integrated. The concept of purity and pollution was applicable to the caste groups only within the village boundary. Generally, each caste shared a common traditional occupation, and whether or not an individual is actually employed in that profession, he will be known by the caste's traditional calling.\footnote{Louis Dumont, \textit{Homo Hierarchicus}, pp. 33-34. Also see F.G. Bailey, \textit{Caste and the Economic Frontier}, Manchester, p. 17.} Hardgrave points out, “The traditional economic system of caste has been likened to a 'super-guild' system, with each caste performing its specific tasks in society by hereditary prescription and divine sanction”. The concept of division of labour, endorsed by the caste system, was precisely intended to regulate the labour force for the benefit of the village community as a whole.\footnote{Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{The Nadars of Tamilnadu}, Bombay, 1969, pp. 5-6.} Caste system, as a viable economic and social order, functioned only within the geography of the

\footnote{Clifford Geertz, \textit{The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays}, New York, 1973, pp. 274-76.}
\footnote{Eugene F. Irschick, \textit{Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s}, Madras, 1986, pp. 16-17.}
\footnote{Louis Dumont, \textit{Homo Hierarchicus}, pp. 33-34. Also see F.G. Bailey, \textit{Caste and the Economic Frontier}, Manchester, p. 17.}
\footnote{Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{The Nadars of Tamilnadu}, Bombay, 1969, pp. 5-6.}
village. The interdependent nature of the village economy and the relative degree of ritual status vis-à-vis their traditional occupation inhibited the growth of caste solidarity. They never functioned as a political unit to improve their status. While describing the non-colonial village of Malabar society, Miller observes, “the only unifying features of a caste over a wide area were the common name and the overlapping zones of kinship and internal administration; and even these often ended abruptly at political boundaries....Territorial segmentation thus overrode the uniformity and unity of castes over a wide area”. 10 The feudal structure of village economy, based upon the patron-client nexus, regulated the social traffic conflict and competition between Jatis, which never crossed the village boundary. The land owning dominant castes generally controlled the power mechanism of the village. Burton Stein points out that there were active alliances and cooperation between land-owning castes and Brahmins to have a hold in the village, which was a “distinctive social and political element” of the medieval India. 11

Traditionally, caste groups functioned as a corporate body to pool the resources for the mutual benefit. In every village one or two ‘dominant’ castes held large portions of the land to whom the dependent lower castes owed its allegiance. 12 Consequently, the villages were divided on factional lines for political reasons. F. G. Bailey also points out, “… the castes were not ranged in opposition to one another, rather, and the dependent castes are divided among themselves by their loyalties to masters of higher caste”. 13 Political clashes occurred between factions of the village and between villages. At times the conflict between right hand and left hand castes assumed the proportion of communal violence over ritual/temple rites. While describing the clashes between the ‘right hand and the left hand’ castes in Madras town, W.R. Cornish, the superintendent of 1871 Census Report writes, “The quarrels arising out of these small differences of opinion (standards, devices and symbols) were so frequent and serious in the seventeenth century that in the town of Madras it was found necessary to mark the respective boundaries of the right hand castes in

their processions found occupying the streets of the left hand and vice-versa". On the other hand, many caste groups frequently attempted to improve their ritual status by adopting the Brahminical customs and life-style. This was largely owing to the designation of Sudra-hood over a vast bulk of the society. In South India the four fold Varna theory had not come into practice for stratifying the society. There was a big hiatus between the priestly class and the other communities in the ritual hierarchy. As a result, the middle rung of the society was always engaged in acquiring due place in the social order through various 'pretentious' claims.

The advent of British rule brought about a remarkable change in the social behaviour of the various communities of the village. M. N. Srinivas rightly points out that, "It was the establishment of Pax Britannica which set the castes free from the territorial limitations inherent in the pre-British political system". The introduction of new production system undermined the inter-relations of the economic interdependence between the castes in the village. The newly created economic avenues virtually released the lower castes from the archaic patron-client nexus. With the geographic mobility and an access to economic opportunities many caste groups felt the need for spinning caste associations, across the Province, to improve their economic and social position.

Crucial to the social change in the nineteenth century was the process of colonial modernisation. Under the impact of the British rule, India underwent a fundamental transformation. As a result, it witnessed a breakdown of old loyalties, change in the value system and the emergence of new social classes. The integration of India's economy with the world capitalism via its metropolis in a subordinate position did not bring any considerable change. The disarticulated mode of colonial production led to the uneven development of capitalism with stagnant features. To use Bipan Chandra's words, "Colonial modernisation involved not only the Indian economy but also the patterns of social, political, administrative and cultural life. A

---

16 M. N. Srinivas, Caste in Modern India and Other Essays, p. 35.
18 Bipan Chandra, Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India, New Delhi, 1981, p. 9.
whole world was lost, an entire social fabric was dissolved, and a new social framework came into being that was stagnant and decaying even as it was being born.  

Colonial restructuring did not bring holistic transformation. It only introduced modernisation partly to integrate the Indian economy with the World Capitalism. Expansion of transport, communication and English education was instrumental in consolidating the Colonial Empire. Colonialism, as historical phenomenon, did not create a space for the development of capitalism of indigenous kind. On the other hand, India only felt the slightest impact of industrial revolution of its metropolis. Under the banner of Colonial modernisation, at various stages, India developed a classic mode of production by retaining the traditional links and feudal structure.

The Colonial state made a concerted effort to retain the feudal links and the traditional elements by reinforcing them through official patronage. Bernard S. Cohn in his essay, *Representing Authority in Victorian India*, explicated the dual nature of the colonial project in comprehending and consolidating the Indian Empire. After the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the British developed a codified theory of authority to rule India, through the British monarch. This theory was based upon the ideas and assumptions about the proper ordering of groups in Indian society, on feudal lines, and their relationship to their British rulers. While describing the cultural essence and the political strategy of the Queen’s Proclamation of 1858 he wrote, “If India were to be ruled in a feudal mode, then an Indian aristocracy had to be recognized and/or created, which could play the part of loyal feudatories to their British Queen. If India were to be ruled by the British in a ‘modernist’ mode, then the principles which looked to a new kind of civic or public order had to be developed”. Caught up in the thicket of political ambivalence the colonial state conveniently employed the feudal and representational theories to control the local subjects, which created an indispensable inner contradiction. It was the semi-feudal and semi-modern nature of

19 Ibid., pp. 7-9.
colonial administration, which created a conducive environment for the emergence of caste association on primordial lines.

Emphasising the role played by the colonial engineering in generating a political consciousness, I would discuss the development of caste ‘Sangams’ and their activities with a view to improve their social and economic position. In a limited sense, it is an attempt to trace and study the indigenous social groups’ response to the colonial modernisation. Mainly concentrating on the caste groups’ reaction to census operation, I would try to elucidate the pretentious claim and ‘grand history’ concerning the mythological origin put forward by them for higher status. During the colonial period, the concept of caste underwent a change without losing its fundamental feature. It has become, by now, a legitimate candidate for political and social mobilisation in modern India. There occurred a shift from focusing on the hierarchical nature of caste structure to its embodiment of various substances. Though caste was largely affected by economic and social change, it has by no means disappeared and it has historically revealed its resilient qualities to change. By taking recourse to both modern and traditional means it has come to serve as an active integrative agent for social and political mobilisation.

Colonial Commitment to Social Change

Caste system, as ruling ideology, continues to play a significant role in the society. It enjoyed the patronage of the dominant section of the society. The priestly class, as the sole proprietors of knowledge, zealously guarded against others having access to the education. The dominant caste groups kept the rest of the masses under perpetual economic dependence as servile community. As a result, there was no concerted effort on the part of the lower caste against caste tyranny. They were unable to function as a class for them to challenge the hegemonic order of the society. In spite of their numerical preponderance they were incapable of questioning the validity of the caste system. Prior to the nineteenth century, no significant attempt was made

---


by the caste groups either to claim higher status or entry to the temple.\textsuperscript{25} The advent of Christianity offered new opportunities and created a community consciousness among the lower castes. Missionaries became the harbinger of social emancipation in the early modern period. Many lower caste people found an outlet in the missionaries' enterprise to escape from the caste stigma. Their campaign against fraudulent imposition and ridiculous social practices of Hindu religion created self-awareness among the local people. Oriental scholars, missionaries and colonial bureaucrats were instrumental in bringing the territorially segmented village society into the vortex of politics.\textsuperscript{26} However, their commitment to social reform in general, and caste system in particular, were limited due to various political and cultural reasons.

Colonial commitment to social change was always partial, limited and incomplete. It never showed a keen interest in eradicating the social evil in order to create an egalitarian society.\textsuperscript{27} Social change was always there in its agenda, but it never became the core of colonial policy. Partly owing to its economic interests and partly to social disturbances, the colonial state did not want to earn the wrath of the higher castes by championing the cause of social reform. On the other hand, the colonial state consistently lampooned the social malady and the cultural backwardness of Hindus.

Colonialism evolved a strategy by imposing different categories upon local society for administrative purpose, which created tension among various groups. Under the cloak of modernisation, it converted the traditional economy of mutual interdependence into a system of competition for privileges and favours. Colonialism created or invented necessary categories such as non-Brahmins, Brahmins and other Hindus, animists and aborigines to perpetuate the social differences through divide and rule policy. They saw the development of egalitarian ideas as a measure, which would support them against the perceived threat from the Brahmin quarters. British viewed that the cultural and social differences between Brahmins and others would enable them to divide the society on communal lines into watertight compartments for administrative purposes. In the late nineteenth century, the imagined category, ‘Non-

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., pp. 14-16.
Brahmin', was readily brought into official use, a terminology, which tended to subsume a large number of miscellaneous social groups as against the Brahmins.

The argument to categorise the local people for strategical colonial requirement was advanced by many British bureaucrats. J. H. Nelson, the author of *The Madura Country* manual contributed to the idea of Non-Brahmin by stressing the cultural and social differences between the two 'races'. He categorically stated, "I believe that it will be found to be necessary to legislate separately for the Non-Brahmin castes, as being in all essential respects separate and distinct from, and incapable of association with the Brahmins".28 According to him, there were no 'Sudras' in South India; therefore Hindu laws cannot be imposed upon them. He also stressed the need for revamping the local behaviour pattern to rule the society. Thus, British choice of the so-called 'rational category' was replaced by indigenous classification. On the other hand, they realized the need for creating an outlet for newly emerging identity consciousness among various groups. Traditionally Hindu society was divided on caste lines. Therefore, the colonial state created ample space for the local groups to freely articulate their aspiration in social realm. Their cultural assertion, social pretension and ritual claims were endorsed by official reports. Many oriental scholars, missionaries, and colonial bureaucrats evinced keen interest on manners, customs and habits of various caste groups. J. H. Nelson in his manual, *The Madura Country* pointing to W. Taylor's *Oriental Manuscripts* argued that, the Vellalars, a numerically preponderant agricultural caste, was the most respectable among the Tamils. Taylor further enumerated, "The Vellalars, by the effect of their ploughing (or cultivation), cared for the welfare of all... Things of good report or integrity, the good order of castes, and (manual) skill, all these things come to pass by the merit (or efficacy) of the Vellalar's plough".29 Such exalted remarks about customs and manners were taken by the caste leaders to claim a unique status for the Vellalars among the Tamils. These flamboyant and bombastic remarks were frequently brought out in their caste journal so as to kindle their atavistic feelings. Caldwell, a noted Dravidiologist, of Scottish Mission, wounded the caste pride of the Nadars by describing them as "down right indolence...they cannot bear to make

---

experiments and calculate possibilities of advantage".\textsuperscript{30} He further alluded to have mentioned in his pamphlet \textit{The Tinnevelly Shanans}, that, Shanans along with the Ezhavas had sprung from the same stock of ‘Santrars’ (a toddy tapping caste in Sri Lanka). Deeply hurt by the low profile given by Caldwell many English educated Shanans began to register their protest. In 1857, the agitation against his remarks culminated in riots and the book was subsequently withdrawn from circulation. Many caste representatives expressing their displeasure over Caldwell’s opinion about their community wrote letters to concerned authorities to persuade him to withdraw his views. One of the active petitioners Y. Gnanamuthoo Nadar blamed Bishop Caldwell’s writings for Tinnevelly schisms of 1857 and for the resuscitation of caste feelings among Nadar Christians. He wrote also to the Archbishop and Prime Minister Gladstone.\textsuperscript{31}

During this period, each of the caste groups, apart from claiming a place in the four-fold Varna, tried to prove their social standing by presenting a very fanciful history about their origin, status and customs.\textsuperscript{32} They assiduously stressed the cultural supremacy in order to get due recognition by colonial authority in their official reports. Thus, myth making became crucial to the issue of social ascendancy. Moreover, many of the low caste members, those who made fortune with the unfolding of colonial modernisation felt the need to improve their social status by participating in their community activities. They made an attempt to improve their corporate status by bearing the expenses of the local temple festivals.\textsuperscript{33} However, the higher castes zealously guarded against their entry into the temple. Shanans who were described as a very low caste in the hierarchy, improved their economic status by taking recourse to the colonial means. By now, they felt the need for asserting their rights for participating in the temple worship. In 1885, the Shanans of Kamuthi, a village in the district of Ramnad, petitioned to the Raja of Ramnad for permission to conduct a ritual feast in the temple. The temple authorities accepted to receive the offerings through a high caste person but denied them the opportunity to approach the

\textsuperscript{30} Robert Caldwell, \textit{A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages}, London, 1875, p. 50.

\textsuperscript{31} Quoted in Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{The Nadars of Tamilnadu}, p. 78.

\textsuperscript{32} S. Saraswati, \textit{Minorities in Madras State: Group Interests in Modern Politics}, New Delhi, 1974, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{33} C. Paramarthalingam, \textit{Social Reform Movement in Tamil Nadu}, p. 203.
proximity of the temple, since it would pollute the deity.\textsuperscript{34} This resulted in a serious legal problem in which the colonial government always stood in favour of status quo. However, the lower caste people such as Vaniyars and Shanans consistently put forward their claim for higher status in the social hierarchy. They used their economic resources to create new myths about their historical origin, culture and status. While explaining the desire of the lower caste for higher status, the 1871 Census Report Commissioner Cornish argued that the lower the caste, the more it claimed pre-eminence for itself. He wrote, “As the lower castes, in these days, frequently send out into the world men who accumulate wealth, so it happens that the surplus funds of such men are often employed in the feeding of the Pundits to prove the ancient glories of their particular castes”.\textsuperscript{35} During these days a corpus of literature on caste was produced to prove their cultural superiority.

**Census Operation Report and Caste Aspirations**

The relation of Census Report with Hindu consciousness is crucial to the understanding of community formation in modern India. As a result of colonial modernisation, the suppressed social consciousness began to assert itself for equality on par with the higher castes. Census Report provided an ample space for the subaltern caste groups to claim a high status in order to liberate themselves from the social obscurantism. As a prelude to their political liberation many caste groups organised themselves on community lines to put forward their demands, pretensions and history for due recognition by the colonial authority. Census Report had in a way become the harbinger of social emancipation. It made an indelible impression on the social, political, and intellectual life of modern India.

In the late nineteenth century, territorially segmented, culturally divided and socially compartmentalised Tamil community witnessed a key social change with the advent of Colonial modernisation.\textsuperscript{36} Spread of English education, growth of transport and communication facilities and centralised administration created a new social environment where intermixing of caste members became inevitable for their local transactions. However, in this process, English educated low caste members were unable to participate freely in public life due to their caste stigma. Age-old social


\textsuperscript{35} Madras Census Report, vol.1, 1871, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{36} Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*, p. 18.
restrictions and cultural isolation became impediments to their economic growth.\textsuperscript{37} Lower caste intellectuals awakened by the western ideals increasingly felt the need for socialisation and cultural acceptance. Instead of breaking the system to free them, they tried to find a more acceptable place within the ambit of caste hierarchy. Owing to their economic independence and political awareness, they engineered caste associations to collectively fight for a berth within the Varna order. Further, they found the census operation as a golden whip to exert their spurious claims. They tried to achieve their goal through official reports, which they failed to obtain through the social process. Census Report, though it recorded their impetuous claims, declined to give legal sanction. It only earned them a considerable rebuke and insult from the society.\textsuperscript{38}

Census operation was perhaps, one of the grand administrative activities, directly linking every subject with the authority. Census taking, as part of the government policy, came into operation since 1871. The concern of Imperial authority for ‘census taking’ varied with time and region. However, the information elicited from the decennial report also shifted in its emphasis according to the colonial need.\textsuperscript{39} Ethnography and religion were thought to be essential features of the early report. But it gave way to political and individual matters in the early twentieth century. The approach and perception of the Census Commissioner also made an indelible mark on it. Thus, Census Report was viewed as a study of the colonial life for colonial administration.\textsuperscript{40}

Census Commissioners in each of their report categorically stated that, the recording of the caste and their traditional occupation was purely for demographic and sociological purpose and not to perpetuate the caste system in India.\textsuperscript{41} However, strongly impelled by colonial need and oriental understanding, they at times indulged in perpetuating the caste differences. Partly owing to ignorance and partly due to blatant racial approach, “the attempts of European writers”, as Cornish rightly points out, “to describe the castes of India have generally tended to make confusion worse

confounded”. Further, he emphasised that the Census Report must be understood that it makes no attempt to deal with the social position of any great division of the people. The castes are entered in the order in which native authorities are pretty generally agreed in the order of their relative importance. He meant the Varnashrama Dharma as the sole native authority in the matter of social regulation. Following a dual approach, he criticised vehemently the unequivocal functioning of the caste system. On the other hand, he tried to locate the Indian society within the gamut of caste system to maintain social harmony.

The subject of caste system was fundamental to social analysis. Each of the Census Report devoted considerable pages for the description of caste system and its functioning with relative data. Economic and social development was further elaborated with the help of numerous statistical tables and with the discursive sections. It delved deeply into aspects such as caste, education, marriage etc. Caste was not merely a basic category in the minds of the Census Commissioners, but a factor, which cut across nearly all-human existence. Except the subject ‘infirmity’, every aspect of social, cultural, political and economic life were analysed in the light of the caste structure. The following table regarding the dissemination of education with special reference to English education has been clearly demonstrated on the basis of caste and religion. With regard to Brahmans, it further sub-divided on the basis of their language. I feel the dissemination of education was crucial to the emergence of community consciousness, which subsequently prepared the masses to collectively put forward their claims for colonial privileges.

Table-6.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No.</th>
<th>Castes</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Agamudaiyan</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ambalakaram</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Ambattam</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Balija</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43 Ibid., p. 118.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Billava</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tamil Brahmins</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Malayalam Brahmins</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Telugu Brahmins</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Canarese Brahmins</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total Brahmins</strong></td>
<td><strong>358</strong></td>
<td><strong>371</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Chakkiliyan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Chetti</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Devanga</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Holeya</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Idaiyan</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kaikolan</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Kallan</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Kammalan (Tamil)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Komati</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kuravan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kurumban</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kusavan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Maravan</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Muttaraiyan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Pallan</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Palli</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Paraiyan</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Sale</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Shanam</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Tottiyan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Vaiyian</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Vaniyan</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Vannan</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Velama</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Veilala</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Labbai</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Indian Christian</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above report lucidly points out to the glaring difference between Brahmins and others. The slow process of literacy made the marginalised castes to remain culturally backward. These castes always made an attempt to elevate their status only within the traditional order. Owing to absence of leadership, they were
unable to put forward their claims forthrightly. On the other hand, some of the aspiring castes such as Shanans and artisan castes, pointing to their relative backwardness in literacy, demanded the government to grant more facilities to their caste members.

As a prologue to the subject caste, each of the Census Report discussed in length the origin, evolution and spread of caste system. Long before the advent of Aryans, Turanian or Scythian race overran the Tamil country and established their civilization, which of course did not subscribe to the idea of social compartmentalisation. Contributing to this, the Census Report Commissioner W. Francis posits the totemistic practices that were prevalent among the Dravidians, which discards the possibility of a social stratification of any kind. On the other hand, pointing out to the Swayamvara incident of Arjuna marrying Draupathi incognito of Brahmin, he argued Brahmins played a subordinate role to Kshatriyas. In the early period they (Brahmins) were ordinary performers of domestic rituals, students of Vedas, few in number, feeble in body and spirit. However, in the course of time, he opined, “Before the time of Manu, the effeminate and despised priest caste had succeeded in establishing their intellectual supremacy, and tincturing all laws and philosophy with their own peculiar colouring”. With the passage of time, people had succumbed to the subjection of Aryan laws and lost their original valour and identity. Later they became anxious to claim a due place in the Aryan social order, rather than liberating themselves from diabolic subjection. Most of the Census Commissioners repeatedly emphasised that the policy of the Brahmins was one of intellectual ascendancy and conciliation, and they attempted to include the aborigines in their own social system, by grafting them on to the great order of Sudras or servile castes.

The enumeration of traditional occupation against each of the caste became a controversial issue in the early twentieth century. In the Census Reports, under the column ‘caste’, the hereditary occupation was mentioned in spite of a change in their present occupation. Many aspiring castes strongly refuting such enumerations petitioned the Government to make alternative changes in the column ‘hereditary occupation’. The artisan caste (Hamsala) also registered their protest against classifying them lower than the agricultural caste. Hamsalas were consistently urging

47 Ibid., p. 129.
the Government to classify them under the Vishwakarma Brahmin category. Nevertheless, the Government never accepted their claim. The Nadar Mahajana Sangam passed a resolution in their annual conference (1917), to request the government for allowing their caste members to enter their present occupation rather than their traditional occupation. Their demand was conceded by the Government and subsequently, the column for traditional occupation was withdrawn from the Census Report completely since 1921.

With a view to improve their social status and to shun their social stigma, many of the Caste Associations petitioned the Government to enter their caste name ending with honorific ‘r’ in place of nominative singular ‘n’ or to change their nomenclature in official reports. In due course, their demand was accepted and many of the castes were also allowed to change their name such as Panchama was replaced by Adi Dravida in 1923. In 1935, the caste name ‘Idaiyan’ was registered as ‘Idaiyar’ or ‘Yadava’. The fisherman caste name ‘Sampadavan’ was entered as ‘Parvatharajakulam’. Later Vannans, a washerman caste was allowed to register their name as ‘Rajakas’ in official records. The change in the caste name created a new confidence among the caste members and it further strengthened their caste solidarity to function as a new pressure group in the vortex of politics. Some of the caste groups suffered a setback owing to their inability to institutionalise their community consciousness.

Kallan, Maravan and Agamudaiyan who were generally designated as Mukkulator (Triune Caste), were numerically preponderant in the Southern Tamil districts. In the Census Report, their traditional occupation was always enumerated as ‘thieving’ or ‘plundering’. While explaining their characteristics, the Census Commissioner generally highlighted their proclivity for violence and robbing. W. Francis, in the “Glossary of Castes, Tribes and Races” of 1901, has given a vivid account of their criminal record – “In 1897, 42% of the convicts in Madurai Jail and 30% in Palamcottah Jail at Tinnevelly belonged to either Kallan, Maravan or Agamudaiyan. In Tinnevelly in 1894, 131 cattle thefts were committed by men of these three castes against 47 by members of others...” Further, he continued, “The

49 S. Saraswati, Minorities in Madras State, pp. 25-27.
Kallans had, until recently, a regular system of blackmail called Kudikaval, under which, each village paid certain fees to be exempt from theft. The consequences of being arrears with their payments quickly followed in the shape of cattle thefts and 'accidental' fire in houses'. Such frequent descriptions in the Government Reports about a particular caste maligned their social image. The Kallan community was finally, in 1915, designated as criminal tribe by Mr. Paddison, Collector of Madura. They were asked to register their fingerprints before hand in the nearby Police station. A wholesale character assassination launched by the Government had uprooted them from their social standing. They were unable to recover themselves from this social stigma, which adversely affected their economic and educational improvements. Moreover, they were unable to coordinate themselves, to pool their resource into a community organisation to challenge the validity of the government order. The Act was, however withdrawn only after Independence of India.

Census Reports played a crucial role as a regulatory mechanism in maintaining the caste status of the people. The Census Reports, while giving lower castes an opportunity to articulate freely, never approved their claims considering them as baseless and absurd. Every Census Report gave a vivid account of pseudo claims made by various caste groups for higher status. According to the 1871 Census Report, Cornish found around 2000 Shanans who had registered themselves as Kshatriyas. In 1891, there were about 153,000 people who had written themselves as Kshatriyas. Many Tamil lower castes emphasising their ancestral role in military, also claimed Kshatriya status, which resulted in further addition of about 80,000 people in 1911. Some of the Tamil trading castes such as Komati, had put forward their claim for Vaisya status and about 19,000 of them already registered under the column. However, a position in the Varna system, which they have, no claim to, as there was no such classification found in early Dravidian civilisation.

---

51 Ibid., p. 168.
52 NNR, Madras, 1915, for the week ending 27 November 1915, New India of 25 November 1915.
Christianity and Caste

Caste was an unalterable feature of Indian society. It systematically maintained and regulated the social traffic. However, with the advent of colonial rule there seemed to have occurred a considerable fluidity in the system. Many caste groups giving free flight to their fertile imagination came up with new theories to restore their lost identity in the social structure. The government granting legal sanctions ratified some of their claims. Conversion was considered a conducive method by lower caste people to shun the social stigma assigned to their hereditary group. In the early nineteenth century, there occurred an en masse conversion to Christianity among the lower caste people in the Southern Tamil coastal districts. Many lower caste villages embraced Christianity with a view to improve their social status. As a result, churches were flooded with lower caste converts and were thus designated as ‘Shanan’ or ‘Paraya’ churches. Conversion though seen as liberation from serfdom for the servile people, hardly helped them to break the social stigma attached to their ‘Jati’. The early missionaries strongly believed that Hinduism was racial and social rather than theological. The converts were allowed to continue their social practices in conformity to their ritual status. While pointing out the missionary agenda for reaching out to the heathens, Charbonnaux opined that, “The native congregations of Southern India have been founded on the principle that, to be baptized, a man need not renounce his own caste and nationality; so that though they are not Hindus, if that word be used in a religious sense, if, on the contrary it is used in its natural and geographical sense, they are Hindus as well as their (fellow) countrymen. They have always been so, and are accepted by all to be so, with the rank and rights of their respective castes”. Catholic missionaries, generally adopting the local customs, permitted the congregations to follow their caste practices and other social norms. In many places, the congregations were divided on caste lines. Priests and Catechists were appointed from within the caste to lead the churches. In the Protestant churches, though the caste

57 Ibid., p. 32. Also see E. Sundararajan, Conversion Called Confusion, New Delhi, 1984, p. 6.
58 Quoted in Madras Census Report, vol. 12, 1911, p. 60.
system was not permitted on principle, the local congregations functioned as a conglomeration of caste groups. Conflicts between caste groups for social status became very common. People of higher castes refused to take instructions from the priests of the lower caste. In 1852, Sawyerpuram Shanan congregation revolted against appointment of a priest from a lower caste. 59 Many church members blamed the missionaries of not being sensitive to their social feelings. Caste consciousness and community feelings made an indelible impression on the history of Indian church. Inter-caste feuds became inevitable among members and new churches were planted with a view to maintain their caste tradition. In 1857, a rival faction, after breaking its ties with the Scottish Church, established a separate Church called “Hindu Church of Lord Jesus”, in Nazareth, a small village in Tinneveli District. 60

Change of religion, particularly among the lower caste people, did not help them instantly to come out from their social stigma. It however, created a hope and opened up new vistas for social advancement. As Muthalore missionary Kerns observed, “Christianity had taught them to feel they are superior to what they originally considered to be”. 61 Access to worship on par with others, new pattern of life style and opportunity for education brought a revolutionary change in them. As John Abbes points out, “Christianity not only offered them the gospel of a new religion, but also the possibility of secular salvation and release from the fetters of tradition which had for centuries burdened them with social disabilities and economic dependence”. 62 Caste system was not only accepted as a social phenomenon, but also treated as a real material category to measure the economic and political development of the society. It was given a legal currency by the Government for administrative purpose and welfare measure. Churches also did not try to eradicate the caste observances, as it would hurt their mental and psychological feelings. Census Report also permitted the native Christians to enter their castes. According to the 1871 Census Report, there were 3697 Brahmins who registered themselves as Christians along with their caste designations. 63 Further, 5100 Kshatriyas also registered themselves as Christians. Most of the lower caste people did not enter their names in

59 Robert L. Hardgrave, The Nadars of Tamilnadu, p. 76.  
62 Quoted in ibid., p. 57.  
63 Census Report, Madras, 1871, vol. 1, p. 112.
the caste column. Writers, Vellalas and commercial castes registered themselves as Christians with their respective caste titles. Conversion was seen more of a social transformation than anything else. It did not bring sudden remarkable change in the economic status of a person. Economically backward lower caste converts therefore, had to be supported by the government along with Hindu brethren. With the avowed view, government decided to extend the concession to Indian Christians of depressed class origin. In the field of education, the Government decided in May 1926, that the half fee concession to which the poor pupils of the depressed classes are otherwise eligible, under rule 92 of the Madras Educational Rules, should not be denied to them because of their conversion, and Appendix 17-A of the Madras Educational Rules has been altered accordingly.64

Caste did not show the signs of weakening. On the contrary, it found a new solidarity to function as an effective pressure group to reap the benefits and privileges ushered in by the Colonial modernisation.65 Christianity empowered the lower caste converts to recover their perception, mentality and cultural psyche vis-à-vis the social dominant worldview. The following, religion-wise literacy table indicate a spectacular growth of literacy among the native Christians. According to 1911 Census Report about 52 per cent of the total population of the native Christians of Madras Presidency were lower castes that were generally denied education earlier.

Table – 6.2 66
Religion-wise Literacy (Per 1000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hindu</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mohammedan</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Christian</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mythology and Aspiration for Status

In the late nineteenth century, myth making became a prominent intellectual activity, among the aspiring caste groups. It came to be viewed increasingly as a process for upward mobility in the social hierarchy. Many of the caste intellectuals actively involved in constructing the history of their past glory to kindle the primordial sentiments. They prepared fictitious genealogy emanating from Aryan God or hero. A beautiful and plausible explanation of their caste names was given so as to make it appear that it is not of Dravidian but Aryan and an Aryan of very high class. Obliged Brahmins also ratified their pretensions by giving genealogical distinction. However, they were extremely jealous of any new admission into their own caste. Indeed, a perusal of all accounts of caste of Madras Presidency, including the lowest, would leave one under the impression that the whole population is Aryan by race, a claim, which historically is highly improb~able.

The lower caste people came to believe that the social position assigned to them was by Brahminical authority, and they felt it was tyrannical and unjust. They tried to assert their rights, not by attacking the system as unjust, but by claiming a higher and more ritually pure position in the caste hierarchy. They sought to retain the system and through the new mythology of the caste history, to place themselves at the top. In Tamil Nadu, though many castes made an attempt to find a berth in the Varna system, only a few contenders, owing to their economic and academic prosperity, employed all fictitious ways and means to place themselves at the top of the social hierarchy.

Shanans, the toddy tapping caste, numerically preponderant in Southern Tamil coastal districts, designated as a polluting caste in the Census Report, made an attempt to elevate their social status through various means. Hardgrave, in his work, The Nadars of Tamilnadu had studied the rise and growth of Nadars in length, under the

67 Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, p. 267.
68 M. N. Srinivas, Caste in Modern India and Other Essays, p. 21.
69 Madras Census Report, vol. 1, 1871, p. 139.
71 Louis Dumont, Religion, Politics and History in India, p. 112.
impact of modernisation. He argued that the Shanans' quest for higher status enabled them to organise on communal lines to press their claim. It was their inability to achieve a rightful status within the sacred order, which motivated them to upgrade their position in secular domain. Further, in a chapter entitled "The New Mythology of a Caste in Change", Hardgrave meticulously studied various methods adopted by Nadars to prove their Kshatriya status.

As early as 1870s, Shanans put forward their claim to Kshatriya status by publishing a number of booklets and pamphlets. Further, they questioned the various established theories, which denied their martial status. In 1874, a native Nadar Christian published a pamphlet entitled Shandror Kula Marapu Kattal (To Safeguard the Customs of Shandrors), which sought to establish the Nadars as the descendants of the Pandyan Kings, and, having established their noble status, exhorted all Nadars to assume the customs of the Kshatriyas. As they began to economically and educationally prosper, they indiscriminately threw up a number of fictitious claims to expunge their caste stigma. Some intellectuals put forward the theory of Shanans as the original inhabitants of the soil. Others claimed Dravidian Kshatriya status. One pamphlet drew Shanans genealogy from the lost tribe of Israel, thereby claiming Jewish origin; others reportedly claimed Jesus Christ himself as a Nadar. Thus the Nadars' imaginative brain manufactured all possible stories and claims under the sun, to shun away their social stigma. Hardgrave rightly pointed out that 'myth making' was crucial to the political awareness, which enabled them to function as a class in itself to overthrow all social impediments. Despite the ridicule to which these stories were subjected, by scholars and by higher caste communities, the new myth of Kshatriya status became increasingly a reality for the Nadar community.

Pallis are otherwise called 'Padiachis' or 'Vanniyas' numerically a preponderant peasant caste in Northern Tamil districts consistently claimed that they belonged to 'Agni-Kula-Kshatriya' or Fire race. The term 'Vanniya' was derived from the Sanskrit 'Vahni' means fire. They got ratified their genealogy by Brahmins, which traced its origin from Pallava.
Vanniyars claimed that they were the only living representative of the warrior caste - Agni-Kula-Kshatriya of Aryan race - among the Tamils. Vijayaswami Nayakar in his pamphlet, Shanar Vikarpa Vina Vida1, ridiculed the Shanan's claim for Kshatriya status for, they were only mere menial toddy tapping caste which had no right for such a high status. He strongly put forward the claim the Vanniars were the only existing Kshatriyas in Southern part of India.\(^6\) C. Gopal Nayakar, author of the history of Vanniyakula Kshatriya, argued that, the Pallis or the Vanniya occupied a very high position in the ancient India. They were the descendants of Pallavas, who ruled over a country, which extended from the border of the Chola Kingdom to the outskirts of the dominions of the Eastern Chalukyas.\(^7\) Subsequently, they were suppressed and reduced to lower status by the invader race. Another pamphlet called Vanniyar Puranam claimed Vanniyar, who bore the title Sampoovarayar were the rulers of the soil.\(^8\)

Many more aspiring castes manufactured number of literature in support of their claim for higher status. Patnulkaran, a weaving caste, migrated from South Gujarat to Madura region, and Kammalans, an artisan caste, also asserted that they belong to Brahmin caste, use Brahmin title and wore the sacred thread. Many other castes also claimed Kshatriya or Vaisya status by putting forward a number of legends regarding their origin. The caste mythology became an authority; the adoption of sanskritised custom was the proof; and wealth and education were the catalysts to higher status.

**Necessity for Caste Association**

The contestation for cultural status between caste groups became inevitable in the late nineteenth century owing to the backwardness of the Tamil society. Unlike other presidencies, Tamil Nadu did not undergo a fundamental social change.\(^9\) Spread of English, modern ideas and the proliferation of print culture did not evoke any positive response in bringing social reform. On the contrary, it created a

---

\(^6\) Vijayaswami Nayakar, Shanar Vikarpa Vina Vida1, Madras, 1910, pp. 1-7.
\(^7\) C. Gopal Nayakar, Vanniyakula Kshatriya, Madras, 1891, pp. 77-78.
\(^8\) Manicka Nayakar, Vanniyar Puranam, Madras, 1932, p. 17.
community consciousness among the suppressed caste groups, which in turn made a vain and impetuous claim for equality, in the traditional set up, on par with the dominant caste. No substantial initiative was taken by individuals or community to modernise the society as a whole. The question of social equality and freedom was not addressed properly. This was perhaps owing to the exclusiveness of the Brahmins and their intimacy with the colonial government. Brahmins, as active agents of the British Raj, acted as intermediaries between the ruled and the ruler. The incorporation of the Brahminical laws into the judiciary and their monopoly in the education prevented the other social groups from making any substantial improvement. K. Nambi Arooran echoing the same sentiments observed that, “the Brahmins, who by virtue of their caste, occupied a dominant position in society, could hardly afford to advocate any fundamental social changes without at the same time undermining their unchallenged dominance.” It was procrastination towards social reform, which precipitated the caste crisis into racial conflict.

Vellalas were the first to resent vociferously the designation of Sudrahood, which was imposed on them. Unlike other groups, they directed their attack against the Brahmins, who through their cunning diabolic act integrated Tamil caste groups into the Aryan fold. The Vellala intellectuals by virtue of their economic and educational position and also their connection with Saivism challenged the Brahmin supremacy in matters of religion and society. They were successful in converting the caste discrimination into a racial conflict by advancing the theory of Dravidian civilisation. However, their attempts were inadequate as they failed to address the chronic issue of social inequality, an issue lying dormant and unaddressed till the advent of Self Respect Movement.

Traditional Loyalty and Political Modernisation

Under the impact of British rule, caste has been affected fundamentally by social mobilisation and economic change. The collapse of the village economy and impending process of modernisation encumbered the effective functioning of the caste

system. But it did not show the signs of weakening or disappearing from the village life of the society.\textsuperscript{82}

In its modern manifestation the caste association divulged a peculiar mixture of tradition and modernity. The combination of both traditional and modern elements increasingly came to determine the new political culture of shared value. Caste solidarity found its expression in history for the first time in the early twentieth century in the form of caste association to participate in the public life.\textsuperscript{83} Appealing to the traditional and primordial loyalties, caste organisations initially operated as a forum to put forward their petitions and claims to the Government for higher status and privileges. Soon they realised the effectiveness of the number game and collective ability for bargaining vis-à-vis the Government and others in the political arena.

In 1910, a Nattukottai Chetti community member was nominated as a non-official member of the Legislative Council, in appreciation of its contribution to the welfare activities.\textsuperscript{84} In 1921, ‘Nadar Mahajana Sangam’ delegation successfully convinced the Census Commissioner to nullify the column for ‘Traditional Occupation’. The rising expectations of the caste members necessitated the formation of caste association. Though they represent a mere fraction of its potential, they acted as the sole mouthpiece of the community.

Caste association represented the adaptive response of caste to modern, political, economic and social change. As a corporate body, it pooled all its resources for the welfare of their community by opening schools and colleges for the promotion of education to equip their future generations to contest on par with others for privileges. The economic resources and the leadership initiative largely determined the effective functioning of the Caste Sangam. They functioned as a critical link between tradition and modernity.\textsuperscript{85}

The nexus between caste associations and national movement was critical to the political development of Tamil Nadu. The national leaders effectively used the caste associations for political mobilisation. S. Srinivas Iyengar, P. S. Sivaswamy Iyer

\textsuperscript{83} Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{The Nadars of Tamilnadu}, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{NNR}, Madras, 1910, for the week ending 7 December 1910, \textit{Swadesamitran} of 4 December 1910.
and Sethuratnam Iyer participated in many of the caste conferences and appealed to the community members to join the national struggle. M. P. Sivagnanam Gramini, the then secretary of Tamil Nadu Congress Committee, presided over the Nadar Mahajana Sangam annual conference in 1940. Justice Party leaders also effectively used the caste association for legislative politics. W. P. A. Soundara Pandian, who served as the Vice-President of the Nadar Mahajana Sangam from 1920 to 1934, urged the people to give up all unwise Sanskrit customs and take pride in their Dravidian identity. In 1930, many non-Brahmin leaders actively took part in the Congress politics thereby clearing the way for localisation of Congress politics. K. Kamaraj Nadar’s political prominence became the catalytic factor to mobilize local people to Congress. Perhaps, he was one of the successful leaders who transcended the caste identity and paved way for the extension of identity horizon beyond caste association.

Caste association acted as a political force for mass mobilisation within the community and as a representative of the community interests to the outside world. Addressing the immediate needs of the people, caste association had successfully drawn the unlettered masses for the first time, into the vortex of modern politics. As Lloyd I. Rudolph rightly points out, the caste association acted as a link between multitudes of the village and the mainstream politics. The modern “incarnation” of caste and its paraphernalia of other associations provide the channel of communication and basis of leadership and organisation, which enables those still submerged in the traditional society and culture to transcend the technical political illiteracy which would otherwise handicap their ability to participate in democratic politics. As the society began to increasingly modernise itself by breaking the ties of traditional links, the caste association had to give way for regional and national politics. The plurality of commitment, association and interests in the process of political development, under the impact of social mobilisation, had eroded the old communal ties and thus liberated the individual for a new pattern of life and behaviour.
From the foregoing analysis, it may be argued that the emergence of caste associations and community consciousness was the result of Colonial modernisation and the emergence of new social consciousness. As the old-order yielding place to new, the social transformation became inevitable in a colonial environment. Colonial presence, missionary involvement, spread of modern education and the development of mass politics became the major contributory factors in radically altering the style of caste functioning and its social use. Therefore emergence of community consciousness and the caste associations must be viewed in the colonial context as harbinger to new social transformation paving way for the development of mass-based politics in the modern period.