CHAPTER FOUR

Caste Dispute, Riots and the English Company

In South India, society was divided vertically into two caste groups, more commonly referred to as the “left hand caste” and the “right hand caste” (Valangai and Idangai in Tamil) for almost nine centuries, roughly from 1000 to 1900 A.D. Each of the broad caste divisions consisted of many sub-castes which were bounded together. Right Hand and Left Hand caste were not actually caste but they were groups of castes which constituted a broad category of political, social or cultural groups. For instance, in 15 January 1707, Fort St. George Records pointed out that it was deliberated to which of these caste divisions the weaver caste and oilmen caste belonged. The Company assigned the weavers to the Left hand and Oilmen to the Right hand caste which they were ordered to keep or be severely punished. In right hand caste groups the Chetti and Komati were on the top while Paraiyar were at the bottom. In the same way Beri Chetti secured the top and Pallan and Palli were the last among the left Hand caste. In other words, the trading communities, on both sides, were on the top while the untouchable groups of both side were at the bottom.

By and large each of the caste groups claimed a superior position. For instance, the artisan groups and untouchables castes claimed ritually higher status and tried to place themselves along with the upper caste groups. However, this social relation caused bloody dispute and produced riots. By the seventeenth century caste conflicts and riots were almost continuous between the two sides in order to defend their relative social positions and status. Symbol, social space, physical space of human settlements
and more importantly, dignity, pride and superiority was the main reason for these disputes and riots.

The English Company played very decisive roles in quelling the riots as they were primarily concerned about their trade and commerce. They were not worried much about the disputes but for the smooth functioning of commerce they did intervene during the riots. They separated the streets of the different caste groups and enunciated rules and regulations of the Company to control the riots or conflict. The Company's trade used to be greatly affected because of the disputes, particularly during riots, conflicts and strikes. The company was not able to understand the situation and nature of conflicts. But it shows that the power relation was changing. The whole communities particularly artisans and untouchable groups were getting importance as compared to the earlier period.

Madras was the chief place where riots occurred largely and more frequently. Although the whole South India was affected in general, it was more rampant in the Tamil and Telugu speaking country in particular, in which Madras experienced the most frequently during seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries.

**Right and Left Hand Castes: Origin**

The origin of this division remains unknown, unexplained and a mystery. Scholars of South India history like Brenda Beck,¹ Nilakanta Sastri,² N. Subrahminian,³

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Arjun Appadurai and Burtien Stein have agreed that the first known mention of right-left hand caste division appeared in an inscriptions dating from the first half of the eleventh century A.D. Burton Stein mentioned the inscriptions which says: “...in the second regnal year of the king (Kulottunga I) there was a clash between the Right – Left hand and left hand communities in which the village was burnt down, the sacred places destroyed, and the images of deities and the treasure of the temple (Mummudi-Chola-Vinnagar-Alvar temple) looted”. This division appeared also to have existed in Southern Karnataka, “balagey and edagey” terms were used for right and left hand divisions. Other terms were used in later period among the Kannada speakers as desa for right hand division.

In Telegu speaking area the terms Kampulu was used for the Right hand and Panchanamvaru and Panchanulu were for the left hand divisions. Panchanamvaru and Panchanulu means five artisan-trader groups usually consisting of goldsmiths, blacksmiths, braziers, stone workers and carpenters. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these groups were known to us through affiliations of religion. Those who worshiped Vishnu (Srivaivasnavas) came to be known as the right hand divisions, and Siva worshipers allegedly corresponds to the left divisions.

The origin of the Right hand and Left hand caste groups is also traced to the various armies or military classifications of the Cholas. During the eleventh century, Rajaraja Chola invaded Vengi Nadu, Rettaipadi, Gangaipadi, Kollam, Kalingam, Ilam (Ceylon), Madurai and other countries. These armies were classified into two divisions.

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5 Stein, Burton, Peasant State and society in Medieval South India, OUP. Delhi, 1994, p.174.
6 Ibid., pp.174-175.
Rajaraja constituted his own regiments from Cholamandalam (the heartland of the Chola state, in the basin of the Kaveri river) and the second armies made up from the Pandya, Telugu and Canarese countries. The former regiments were made from the Vedan, Nattam, malayanman and Paraiyar castes to be called right hand army, while the other was made up of the Pallans, Pallis, Madigas and Bedars who were called the left hand army.\(^7\)

There were other sources which give some explanations of the origin and meaning of right and left hand castes. Arjun Appadurai gave eleven explanations of the origin of the castes. He collected sources from some of the inscriptions and some from secondary sources.\(^8\) Srinivasa Aiyangar posited that right hand and left hand castes origin was a religious phenomenon. Arjun Appadurerai narrated that “The right hand and left hand castes took its origin from the command of the goddess Kali at Kanchipuram (the seat of so many religious and political changes) where it is said, exist to this day special halls for the two parties called Valankamantapam and Idankaimantapam”.\(^9\)

In the context of the origin of the left hand and right hand castes, Edgar Thurston has three explanations which refer to the conflict between the Kammalan (Artisans) and Vellalas (non-Brahmin dominant Tamil agricultural caste): “The Kammalans belong to the left hand, as opposed to the right hand faction. The origin of this distinction of castes is lost in obscurity, but according to one version, it arose out of

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\(^8\) Ibid., pp.233-241.

a dispute between the Kammalans and Vellala. The latter claimed them as their jatipillaiagal or caste dependents, while the former claimed the latter as their own dependents. The fight grew so fierce that Chola king of Conjeeveram marshalled these two castes and their followers on opposite sides, and enquired into their claims. The Kammalans and those who sided with them, stood on the left for the king, and the Vellalas and their allies on the right. The king is said to have decided the case against the kammallans, who then dispersed in different directions".10

Edgar Thurston's second explanation refers to the conflict between Balijas and Kamallans. He said "according to another legend, a Kammalan who had two sons, one by a Balija woman, and the other by his Kammalan wife, was unjustly slain by a king of Conjeeveram, and was avenged by his two sons, who killed the king and divided his body. The Kammalan son took his head and used it as a weighing pan, while the Balija son made a Peddler's carpet out of his skin, and threads out or the sinews from stringing bangles. A quarrel arose, because each thought the other had got the best of the division, and all the other castes joined in, and took the side of either the Kammalan or Balija".11

Edgar Thurston also recorded the Mysore Census Report 1891, which refers to the origin of right-left castes pertaining to the untouchables groups (Holayas and Madigas): "At a remote period, Jambava Rishi, a sage, was one day questioned by Isvara (Siva) why the former was habitually late at the Divine Court. The Rishi replied that he had personally to attend to the wants of his children everyday, which,
consequently, made his attendance late: whereupon Isvara, pitying the children, gave the rishi cow (Kamadhenu) which instantaneously supplied their every want. Once when Jambava was absent from Isvara’s Court, another rishi, named Sankya visited Jambava’s hermitage, where he was hospitably entertained by his son Yugamuni. While taking his meals, the cream that had been served was so savoury that the guest tried to induce Jambava’s son Yugamuni, to kill the cow and eat her flesh; and, in spite of the latter’s refusal, Sankya killed the animal, and prevailed upon the others to partake of meat.

On his return from Isvara’s Court, Jambava found the inmates of his hermitage eating the sacred cow’s beef; and took both Samkya and Yugamuni over to Isvara’s Court for judgment. Instead of entering the two offenders remained outside while Sankya rishi stood in the doorway. Isavara seems to have cursed them to become Chandallas or outcasts. Hence, Sankya’s descendants, by having stood on the right side were designated right-hand caste or Holayas; whilst those who sprang from Yugamuni and his wife Matangi are called left hand caste or Madigas”.

N. SuhBrahminian also refers to the origin of Right hand and left hand castes. He posits that according to an Itanlai-Valamkai Puranam (of A.D. 1692-93) Siva (the non-Brahmin Vedic deity) and Indra (the Brahmin deity) and Bhrigu (the Brahmin sage) created the right hand division. In another context these divisions were seen as the result of disagreement between Sivas and Pravati. The Idangai-Valangai puranam

\[\text{\textsuperscript{12}}\text{Ibid., vol.IV, pp.315-316.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\text{Subrahminian, Tamil Social History, p.153.}\]
assigned to each division different somatic makers. Blood, skin, and eyeball were assigned to Left Hand while bones, nerves and brain to the right hand caste.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus we can see the various explanation of the origin of the right hand and left hand castes. Each explanation has been related to religion which might be true or wrong but it is a fact the right hand left hand caste groups existed from eleventh century onwards. Perhaps, it is also true that almost all divisions were created through a great conflict and probably winner party was designated as Right hand caste and the loser party as left hand caste, particularly in case of Kammalans caste.

**Terms used for Right and Left Hand Caste**

In generic terms, *Velangai* word was used for right hand caste while *Idangai* was used for Left hand caste. Brenda Beck pointed out that the English term “hand” was misleading. In the Dravidian languages the crucial distinction between arm and hand or between leg and foot was not clearly made. In this sense Right Hand can equally mean Right arm likewise Left Hand as Left Arm. Furthermore, using ‘hand’ as a term caused great problem in Indian society. According to the ritual term, throughout India, the left hand was considered polluted and inferior to the right.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, to orthodox Hindus, ‘left’ was inauspicious. The left represented an inferior status while ‘right’ represents a superior status.\textsuperscript{16}

Arjun Appadurai understand the dual classification in the context of the Indian cultural system as a ‘root paradigm’. He points out that the Tamil terms Valangai and

\textsuperscript{14} Stein, Burton, *Peasant State and society*, p.184.

\textsuperscript{15} Beck, EF Brenda, “The Right-Left Division of South Indian Society”, p.783.

\textsuperscript{16} Subrahminian, *Tamil Social History*, p.153.
Idangai which refer to the left and right hand or arms of the human body was best understood to refer to the right and left sides of the body metaphorically. Appadurai referred to *Manu Dharma Sastra*\(^\text{17}\) according to which, *Purusa*, an original man, as symbol of society, was divided by the gods into four varnas. The Brahmina, born from Purusa’s mouth, was the highest varna. His duty was to teach the Vedas, performed sacrifices for the Kshatriya and Vaisya, and to accept gifts from them in exchange. The Kshatriya, born from the arms of Purusa, possessed royal power and was to fight enemies, gave food and gifts to the Brahmin; in return, he received a share in the leavings of the sacrifices from the Brahmina and wealth from the vaisya. The Vaisya, born from the thighs of Purusa, possessed productive power. His duty was to produce wealth and gave taxes to kshatriya, for protection. The Sudras, born from the lowliest part of Purusa (his feet), had to perform service for the three higher varnas. The Brahminas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were the “twice-born” men divinized through a second ritual birth. The sudra was “once-born”. This was a horizontal division, which was rooted in ranking.

The Varna scheme in South India caste system had two characteristics. Firstly, according to Appadurai, South India had great regard for female bodily substance, which resulted in the endogamous castes division into numerous smaller circles who often marked their distinctions with visible attributes. Secondly, the Kshatriya and the Vaisya were not clearly specified which resulted as the core of the classification of South Indian society into right and left hand castes.\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{17}\) *Manu Dharma Sastra* was written by Manu, the great law giver, in later vedic period (200 B.C. to 200 A.D)

\(^\text{18}\) Appadurai, “Right and Left Hand castes in South India”, pp.219-220.
Brenda Beck also interpreted the "sides of a social body". She points out that according to the Indian tradition, the human body was clearly identified with the two sexes. The left hand caste was considered female while the right caste was considered male. Siva God was an icon as Siva was called Ardhánarīśvara who represents male and female joined in one body. The bronze images of Siva portrayed male-female body. The right side of the figure had the hip, shoulder and chest of a man, while the left side was fashioned with the thighs, waist and breast of a woman.¹⁹ There was a local saying pertaining to the effect that "if the breath be taken in through the right nostril at conception the child will be male; if through the left a female". The popular perception was that moles and muscular trickles were auspicious when they occurred on the right side of man's body or on the left side of a women's body. Ritually, a woman was asked to use her left foot or hand to contrast with the male right in rituals where both sexes participate.²⁰

To understand the two relations of the categories male and female to the four caste categories or varna, it is important to the theory of society as she pointed out, "According to this all pervasive theory of society, Brahmins are ranked first and Kshatriyas second. Furthermore, Brahmins are male in relation to Kshatriyas (implicitly female). Metaphorically, these two varnas are husband and wife. When Kshatriyas are described vis-à-vis the lower varna, however, then the Kshatriyas is spoken of as male".²¹ Speaking from the above facts, therefore, Kshatriyas may be female or male, inferior or superior, according to the groups to which Kshatriyas belong. Thus, the

²⁰ Ibid., p.783n.
²¹ Ibid., p.784.
terms used for the divisions were general and it was also very controversial particularly for the left hand caste who were regarded as polluted.

Burton Stein wondered about the stigma of pollution. He cited the idangai-mangamani inscriptions. According to this record, the idangai groups received good position with respect to the dominant peasant. Despite that, they were using idangai title. Therefore, Stein pointed out “idangai title as a well established symbol of identity.” 22 This title was used by left hand caste substantially in South India even after the twelfth century. Apart from that, according to the records, left hand caste was labelled inauspicious or inferior which actually have no base. Probably low occupations, but in left hand caste, Berri Chettis were but traders and big merchants of Madras and they were also mobile and active than Right hand caste traders, as Arasaratnam understood. 23

The Right Hand and Left Hand Castes: Numerical Strength and Differences

It is hard to give the true figures about the castes and how many castes belong to left castes and right castes. For example, Chetti caste belonged to both right and left hand castes. English records also said that Cootee Chette was from left hand caste while Nairaa Veropa Chetti belongs to the Right hand caste. 24 Pertaining to another example of confusing the groups, the Company received complaints against the oilmen and kaikolan weavers, that these caste groups did not fix either they belong to left or

22 Stein, Burton, Peasant State and society, pp.203-204.


right hand castes. The Company ordered that: “Both castes complain against the kicullar [kaikolan] weavers and the Oylemen that they were very fickle in their cast, that they were sometimes of one caste, and sometimes of another, which give trouble to both castes, so desired the heads may be sent for, which accordingly was done when the weavers declared for the right Hand, which they were ordered to keep, too, or be severely punished”. Furthermore, the Paraiyar caste who belonged to right hand caste, according to N.Subrahminian, in recent centuries, probably in nineteenth century, were treated as left hand caste.

Brenda Beck’s inclusion of the Komati Chettis in Left hand caste is also confusing. Generally, Komati Chetti caste correspond to right hand caste. M. Srinivasa Aiyangar’s dual classification of weaver communities also caused confusion. Usually, the weavers communities belonged to the left hand castes while he divided them into both groups as Devanga and Kaikolan were the left hand castes groups and Jandra, Saliyan and Seniyan were the Right hand castes.

Apart from that, in each groups, castes had many sub-divisions as we have noticed in the weaver castes. Weaver castes sub-divisions were Devanga, Kaikolan,

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26 Diary and Consultations, 1716, p.155.
27 Subrahminian, Tamil Social History, p.154.
Jandra, Saliyan and Seniyan. Among the weaver community, Kaikolan caste was a warrior caste and dominant caste in South India. Kaikolan caste holds the leading position among the weavers. Another instance of Chetti caste, which had several subdivisions differ very greatly in their ways but the best known of them were the Beri Chettis, the Nagaratta Chettis, the Kasukkar Chettis and the Nattukottai Chettis. However, each and every caste had many sub-divisions and differs very greatly within the same sub-castes, which might create problem to identify the caste groups as we have noted in the above paragraph.

Despite that, Fort St. George recorded certain castes, which belonged to Right Hand castes and the Left Hand castes. Firstly, the right hand caste includes Chetti, Pariyar, oilmen, and other castes while the left hand castes also includes Chettis, bricklayers, carpenters, weavers, boatmen, watermen, fishermen, barbers, and other come to the left hand castes.

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33 Thurston, E., Castes and Tribes of Southern India, vol.II, p.92.
34 Diary and Consultations, 1708, p.7.
35 Diary and Consultations, 1716, p.155.
36 Diary and Consultations, 1708, p.7.
37 Diary and Consultations, 1708, p.36.
38 Diary and Consultations, 1708, p.5.
39 Dispatches to England, 1707-8, p.76.
40 Fort St. George records did not mention clearly about Chettis in which group they belong.
M. Srinivasa Aiyangar also classified the right-left hand divisions according to their occupation.\(^{41}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Right Hand</th>
<th>Left Hand</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Traders</td>
<td>Balija</td>
<td>Beri Chetti</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Banajiga</td>
<td>Vaniyans</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Komati</td>
<td>(who yoke two bullocks)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vellan Chetti</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Weavers</td>
<td>Jandra</td>
<td>Devanga</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saliyan</td>
<td>Kaikolan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seniyan</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Artisans</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>Kammalan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kamsali</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Panchalas</td>
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<td>4. Leather workers</td>
<td>Maidga or chakkilyan</td>
<td>Ditto (males)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(females)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Malaiman</td>
<td>Bedar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nattaman</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Field labourers</td>
<td>Palli (females)</td>
<td>Pallis (males)</td>
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<td>and soldiers.</td>
<td>Vedan or Vettuvan</td>
<td>Pallan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paraiyan, Mala and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Haleya</td>
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\(^{41}\) Appadurai, "Right and Left Hand castes in South India", p.217.
The above table shows that there was no clear-cut division. Apart from artisan castes many castes or sub castes were divided on both sides. Interestingly, Chakkilyan females were Right hand castes and males were left hand castes. In this way, palli female belongs to right hand and palli males to the left hand castes. Moreover, the list includes fifteen castes in right hand side but Arjun Appadurai signified that Komattis, Kaikolans, Saliyans and Gollas have been partitioned and the numbers of the castes of either side may be very large.\footnote{Ibid., p.218.}

H.D.Love quoted Captain Colin Makenzie, which according to him, there were 39 castes in ‘Buljewar’\footnote{Mackenzie write “Buljewar” for right hand caste and it is also in terms of Merchants. He says that these groups exported and imported commodities. Although, he included Pariyar caste who were not merchants.} caste (right hand caste). They were Komati, Moochi, Vullickar, Tellanwar, Paniyar, Vullawar, Gundapodikar and Shaunar castes while in the left hand castes (Naggaret)\footnote{Captain Colin Mackenzie uses term “Naggaret” from left hand caste. These castes were not a trading communities. The term is not connoting trading communities. The term Naggaret implied “living in a habitation”.} he gave eleven castes. They were Chitti, Pully, Chakkilyan, Panchalas and Kaikolan.\footnote{Captain Makenzie as cited in H.D.Love, Vestiges of Old Madras, 1640-1800, AES, New Delhi, Madras, 1996, vol.I, p.124.} None the less, his reporting also makes very great confusion. Makenzie excluded Chitti caste from the Right hand caste while Aiyangar included in both sides. Ayangar includes Chakkilyan females in Right hand and male in Left hand caste. Makenzie also quoted fewer number of left hand castes, while Aiyangar gave almost equal numbers.
Francis Buchanan, a traveller, who visited Madras, Mysore, Canara and Malabar, in the early 19th Century has also reported on the right-left hand divisions. He recognized nine castes in left hand side (Idangai).

1. Panchalas: in Panchalas, there were five castes: i) Cubbinadava or blacksmiths; ii) Badiga (carpenters); iii) Cunsugaru (coppersmiths); iv) Culbadiga (Masons); v) Akala, (gold and silver smiths).
2. Beri Chette, a merchant who pretended to be of the Vaisya caste.
3. Devanga, a class of weavers.
4. Heganigaru, oilmakers, who used two oxen in their mills.
5. Gollur or Golawanlu, who transported money.
6. Paliwanlu and Palawanlu, the two tribes of cultivators.
7. Baydaru, a hunter.
8. Madiga, tanners or shoemakers.

Francis Buchanan also indicated nineteen right hand caste groups:

1. Banijiguru, who were traders and divided many religions. The two were most important as; i) Panchum Banijiguru, who were traders and weaned linga; ii) Taliga Banijiguru.
2. Wocligaru, cultivators of the Sudra caste.
3. Joti Phana, oilmakers, who used one bullock in the mill.
4. rungaru, Calico printer and tailors.
5. Ladaru, a kind of Muslim traders who were followed by all artificers of the same religion.

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7. Komati, persons who were really of Vaisya caste.
9. Curubaru, shepherds, blanket weavers and cultivators.
10. Cumbaru, potters.
11. Agasa, washermen.
13. Padma Shalayvaru, a kind of weavers.
15. Uparu, person who dug tanks and builds rough walls.
17. Goallaru, keepers of cow and buffalos.
18. Whalliaru, the paraiyar caste who formed the active part of the right side.

Francis Buchanan’s classifications of the dual division produce much confusion. Generally, washermen, barbers and painters caste belonged to the left hand caste while Buchanan included them in the Right hand castes. Even weavers and boat makers were in both sides. Buchanan accepted that the divisions was often controversial.

Abbe J.A. dubois has also documented about the Left and right hand castes faction in south India. He pointed out that There was another division more general than any he had referred to yet, namely, that into Right-hand and Left-hand factions. This appeared to be but a modern invention, since it was not mentioned in any of the ancient books of the country; and he had been assured that it was unknown in Northern India. Be that as it may, he did not believe that any idea of this baneful institution, as it
existed at the present day, ever entered the heads of those wise lawgivers who considered they had found in caste distinctions the best guarantee for the observance of the laws which they prescribed for the people. 47

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 amongst the natives. 48

Most castes belonged either to the Left-hand or Right-hand faction. The former comprises the Vaisyas or trading classes, the Panchalas or artisan classes and some of the low Sudra castes. It also contains the lowest caste, namely, the Chucklers or leather-workers, who were looked upon as its chief support. 49

Most of the higher castes of Sudras belong to the Right-hand faction. The Pariahs were its chief support, as a proof of which they glory in the title Valangai-Mougattar, or friends of the Right-hand. In the disputes and conflicts which so often take place between the two factions that were always the Pariahs who make the most disturbances and do the most damage. 50

The Brahmins, Rajahs, and some classes of Sudras were content to remain neutral, and do not any direct role take in these quarrels. They are often chosen as arbiters in the differences which the two factions have to settle between themselves.

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49 Ibid, p. 25.

50 Ibid, p. 25.
The opposition between the two factions arises from certain exclusive privileges to which both lay claim. But as these alleged privileges are nowhere clearly defined and recognized, they result in confusion and uncertainty, and are with difficulty capable of settlements. In these circumstances what one can do is to endeavour to compromise matters as far as possible.

When one faction trespasses on the so-called rights of the other, tumults arise which spread gradually over large tracts of territory, afford opportunity for excesses of all kinds, and generally end in bloody conflicts? The Hindu ordinarily so law abiding and gentle in all other circumstances of life, seems to change his nature completely on occasions like these. There was no danger that he will not brave in maintaining what he calls his rights, and rather than sacrifice a title of them he will expose himself without fear to the risk of losing his life. 51

He had several times witnessed instances of these popular insurrections excited by the mutual pretensions of the two factions and pushed to such an extreme of fury that the presence of a military force had been insufficient to quell them, to allay the clamor, or to control the excesses in which the contending factions consider themselves entitled to indulge.52

Occasionally, when the magistrates fail to effect reconciliation by peaceful means, it was necessary to resort to force in order to suppress the disturbances. He has sometimes seen these rioters stand up against several discharges of artillery without exhibiting any sign of submission. And when at last the armed force has succeeded in

51 Ibid, p. 25.
restoring order it is only for a time. At the very first opportunity the rioters are at work again, regardless of the punishment they have received, and quite ready to renew the conflict as obstinately as before. Such are the excesses to which the mild and peaceful, Hindu abandons himself when his courage is aroused by religious and political fanaticism.

The rights and privileges for which the Hindus are ready to fight such sanguinary battles appear highly ridiculous, especially to a European. Perhaps the sole cause of the contest was 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; the other times that of having a trumpet sounded in front of a procession, or of being accompanied by native musicians at public ceremonies. Perhaps, it is simply the particular kind of musical instrument suitable to such occasions that is in dispute; or perhaps it may be the right of carrying flags of certain colours or certain devices during these ceremonies. Such, at any rate, are a few of the privileges for which Hindus are ready to cut each other’s throats.

Sometimes, it so happens that one faction makes an attack on the rights, real or pretended, of the other. There upon the trouble begins, and soon becomes general if it was not appeased at the very outset by prudent and vigorous measures on the part of the magistracy.

He could cite very many examples bearing on this fatal distinction between Right-hand and Left-hand; but what he had already said was enough to show the spirit which animates the Hindus in this matter. He once witnessed a dispute of this nature between the Pariahs and Chucklers, or leather-workers. There seemed reason to fear
such disastrous consequences throughout the whole district in question, that many of
the more peaceful inhabitants began to desert their villages and to carry away their
goods and chattels to a place of safety, just as is done when the country is threatened by
the near approach of a Mahratta army. However, matters did not reach this extremity.
The principal inhabitant of the district opportunely offered to arbitrate in the matter,
and they succeeded by diplomacy and conciliation in smoothing away the difficulties
and in appeasing the two factions, who were only awaiting the signal to attack each
other.

One would not easily guess the cause of this formidable commotion. It simply
arose from the fact that a Chuckler had dared to appear at a public ceremony with red
flowers stuck in his turban, a privilege which the Pariahs alleged to belong exclusively
to the Right-hand faction 53!

In the context of castes belonging to both sides such as weavers, Chetti, painters
and others, it is important to note that “the Left hand caste” and the “right hand caste”
were not as such castes but groups and, therefore, mobility was possible. Burton Stein
also said that, “The divisions were not absolute, corporate or continuous but potential
groupings”. 54 Perhaps, there might be another reasons but group nature was one of the
important reasons.

It is, however, very difficult to point out the exact numbers of castes because of
these great variations. Despite that, numerically, the left hand castes were fewer in
number than the right hand caste. S. Arasaratnam signified that right hand castes were

53 These faction fights have gradually disappeared under the civilizing influences of education and good
government; and if they ever occur at all, are confined to the lowest castes and never spread beyond the
limits of a village. The distinctions between the two factions, however, still exist.

54 Stein, Burton, Peasant State and society, p.205.
numerically superior in Madras. He further stated that in Madras and other coastal
towns, there was a mix of trading castes, artisans’ castes and service castes on both
side.\textsuperscript{55} It is also evident from the dual classification that the trading communities of
both sides were dominating. Chetti communities were leading figures and artisans of
both sides were in between. The lowest groups of both sides were untouchables.

In the context of the differences of castes, in spite of the mixing of trading
castes, artisan castes and service castes on both sides, there were great differences
between them. William Hedges mentioned that the left hand castes were primarily
trading communities and manufacturing castes. These castes were carrying on their
professions from the ancient time and were primarily the agricultural castes, and also
maintained their ancient caste legacy.\textsuperscript{56} Captain Mackenzie supported the views.

The right hand caste claimed certain privileges, which they jealously denied to
the left hand castes. They claimed that they had the right to ride on horseback in
processions or marriage occasions, to carry standards beaming certain devices, using
for their marriage pandals or pavilions, and the twelve pillars. Francis Buchanan adds
that the right hand caste had the right to carry the painted flag with the figure of
hanuman. The left side pretended that all those privileges were confirmed to them by
the grant of Kali on the copper plate\textsuperscript{57} and, therefore, they were of the highest rank

\textsuperscript{55} Arasaratnam, S., \textit{Merchant, Company and Commerce}, p.253.


\textsuperscript{57} Buchanan referred a copper plate at Conjeveram in which according to fable goddess Kali has granted
the privileges to the left hand caste than the right hand caste. The conflict reason was that both castes
groups were claiming to stand equally at the same time. This plate was diametrically opposite. However,
each caste was understanding the privileges which were earmarked for them. In this way they denied
privileges to each other and fought regularly to take this claim. It is also said that the copper plate was
preserved at the temple of that place. Although Buchanan himself doubted the existence of such copper
plate, yet he had to accept their assertion.
having been placed by that goddess on her left hand, which in South India was the place of honours. 58

Irfan Habib pointed out that the Right hand castes were of basically “Vaishnavas” and were associated primarily with agricultural production and local trade in agricultural commodities, while the left hand castes were mostly “Saivites”. The left hand castes were mostly associated with mobile artisans’ production and relatively extensive trade in non-agricultural commodities. 59 Nicholas Dirks pointed out that right hand caste were land owning castes groups such as Vellalars, Mudaliyars, kavuntars, Maravars and untouchables Pariyar caste. The right hand castes usually made up of the higher ‘Sudra’ castes. The left hand groups were made up of traders, merchants, artisans and some lower ‘sudras’ caste groups as well as leather workers. 60

Caste Conflicts and Riots in Madras

Various English records incorporated the evidences of caste conflicts and riots of the two vertically differentiated groups more commonly known as the right and left hand castes or valangai and idangai respectively in Tamil during the seventeenth and eighteenth century Madras. Most agreed that in the two mentioned periods, caste conflicts between the two sides were continuous which caused great problems to Madras people in general, and the English authority in particular, especially when it erupted into a major riot. Honorary distinction, pride, exclusive privileges and religious

58 Buchanan, Francis, A Journey from Madras, pp.77-80.
59 Habib, Irfan, (ed.) Cambridge Economic History of India, CUP. p.27.
superiority were the main factors behind all the disputes. In other words social status, physical space of human settlements, various symbolic locations and areas were the main causes of the riots. It is also very significant that merchants were the leaders of both divisions. Balijas and Komatis were leaders of the right hand castes and Beri Chettis leads the left hand castes.

In the ensuing riots the English Company had an important role to play as the ruler of the port town. For the English authority such disputes was regarded as the "factious madness" which needs to be taken seriously as they destabilized the smooth functioning of trade and commerce.

During our period of study there were four major riots apart from many skirmishes between the two major caste groupings. There were riots in 1652-53, 1707-08, 1716-17, 1720, 1747, 1750, 1786, 1787, 1789-90 and 1795.

During the riots in 1652-53, we found that the leaders were the Balija Chettis (Right Hand Caste) and the Beri Chettis (Left Hand Caste). Seshadri Nayak and Koneri Chettis (right hand merchants) held prominent position in Madras. The immediate reasons were the uses of the routes, wedding, and burial places. President Baker of Madras allotted some portion of the town to each caste for their exclusive residence, and rules were laid down as to the streets through which marriage and funeral processions may pass. In a series of disputes, the right hand merchants told the left hand merchants that they did not worth 'a cash'. In response, the Berewar (left hand

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63 *English Factories in India*, 1651-54, p.155.
64 Ibid., pp.135-136.
caste) replied that the right hand castes have not worth 'two cash'. Upon this the right hand caste attacked the left hand caste, and the whole right hand caste ran with sword and clubs in the left hand castes' streets, plundered their houses and murdered two left hand caste men. Hearing all these the left hand caste groups organized themselves to avenge the wrongs done to them by the right hand side.65 Interestingly enough, during the ensuing riots the two Brahmin brothers, who held very influential positions as 'dubash' to the Agent and the Choultry judge, sided with the Beri Chettis and the Left Hand factions.66 In the context of the caste riots, President Baker said that "We know not what spirit of factious madness hath of late possessed our townes people in generall, but the like, we assure you, in all lives, we never knew".67

The second major caste riots began in the year 1707 and it went till 1708. During this disputes, Thomas Pitt was the Governor of Madras. The leaders of the conflicts were the merchants from the right hand, Sunku Muthu Rama, the rising merchant of Madras on the one hand and the Kelavi Chetti and Venkata Chetti on the left hand side on the other. The reasons for the riots were again the demarcation of streets, wedding and some commercial interests.

There was a continuous dispute between the right hand and the left hand castes for passing through some streets on occasion of their weddings. The Company tried very actively to prevent future dispute.68 The heads of the castes of both sides surveyed the two areas of the town and decided that those who were living in houses in streets

65 Ibid., pp.155-156.
66 Ibid., pp. 236-241.
67 Ibid., p.155.
68 Diary and Consultations, 1707, p.36.
belonging to the other side had to sell them and move to their own area. The area was
demarcated by four stones (pillars) at the cost of left hand caste. The Company ordered
both castes that they should not cross their limits and not ignore the rule.\textsuperscript{69}

However, the right hand castes were not satisfied with the decisions and
consequently they pasted a notice on the pillars on the streets and the same notice was
also given to the left hand caste. The notice was to urge the left hand caste to break the
pillars as it was built by the English authority and at the expenses of the left hand
castes.\textsuperscript{70} The government also noted that a Paraiyar (right hand caste) wedding
procession went through the left hand caste streets, which was against the rule.\textsuperscript{71} As a
result the right hand caste left Madras in large numbers for San Thome and the
neighbouring villages. These belonged to the boatmen, washermen, fishermen and
barber.\textsuperscript{72} The right hand castes tried to take support from the neighbouring countries.\textsuperscript{73}

The left hand chief merchants Kelavi Chetti and Venkata Chetti felt that the
disputes was because of commercial reasons. This relate to the investment in the
Company and right hand castes merchants were not interested in it and they continued
to make little progress till the matter was resolved.\textsuperscript{74} Thomas Pitt summoned the right
hand caste but they refused to come.\textsuperscript{75} Finally, an arbitrary division of streets solved the

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p.40.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p.51.
\textsuperscript{71} Diary and Consultations, 1707, p.52
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., p.54.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., p.61.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.54.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p.62.
matter and it was done through the Governor of San Thome. Lastly, both the head caste signed on the agreement.\textsuperscript{76}

Another riot broke out in Madras in the year 1716 which lasted till 1717. Edward Harrison was the Governor of Madras at this time. Again, the contending leaders were the merchants of both sides. The Kalavi Chetti and Kalatti were from the left hand side and Komati and Chetti castes from the right hand side. It all began when a young boy of the left hand caste hurt a Paraiyar woman of the right hand caste. After hearing such news the whole right hand caste grouped together and came violently in the streets and demanded justice from the Government. Although the right hand group dispersed during the day they gathered together at night. Knowing the grave situation, the head asked the left hand castes people such as cooks, water bearers, coolly, palanquin bearers, flagmen and umbrella bearers to desert the place. The Company ordered to the head of the right hand castes to return to the services otherwise severe consequence may come to their fortunes.\textsuperscript{77}

Another disputes arose between the right hand Komati caste and left hand Chetti caste for some ceremonies.\textsuperscript{78} In the same fashion, a dispute broke out between both the castes to take the Nagaram temple because the Komatis caste sang in the Nagaram temple.\textsuperscript{79} However, the solution came by act of pardon of Chetti and Company ordered that both divisions should not disturb the public ceremonies.\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{76} Diary and Consultations, 1708, pp.5-7.

\textsuperscript{77} Diary and Consultations, 1716, p.155.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p.149

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., pp.198-200.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p.30.
Again, a minor dispute broke out in the year 1720 between both the castes to take streets for the procession and other ceremonies. The Madras Governor Warren Hastings was informed by the right hand castes that the left hand castes had carried an image in procession through their streets. Therefore, Governor talked sixteen left hand caste merchants for inquiring purpose but they refused anything regarding the procession. However, the Company decided to hold an inquiry.81

Another caste riot broke out in the year of 1747 in Madras. The Chettis [L] collected in a mob and complained that the Komatis rode through Muttialpet on horseback. The disturbance was quelled, but the strength of caste feeling even when the town was deserted (because of the French occupation) was surprising.

Another caste riot broke in the year on 3rd March of 1750 in Madras. The Deputy Governor acquainted the Board with the fact that the ground laid open by the French to the Northward of the Town and the stopping up Middle gate had been the rise of much bone of contention between the Right and Left hand castes. The Right castes wanted the open space to be segregated between the two sides, while the Left side wanted it as common. Tellasinga Chetti [L] went to the Kachchillsvara temple in a palanquin, and was beaten up by the Right side because he went through their streets, though Tambu Chetti, his brother, had always gone that way. The Fort St George Council allowed a new access road for the Left side through the open area, and the rest of the area was divided between the two sides. But no processions could ever be taken out on this ground. Since Tellasinga Chetti could substantiate his claim that his brother Tambu Chetti had used that road, and because of his power, he did not have to pay a

81 Diary and Consultations, 1720, pp.190-191.
forfeit. But the access road for the Left side was allowed in return for permitting the Right side to use the temple on occasions.82 A very interesting judgement has been given by the company that certain houses in Cachalli Pagoda street where Brahmins formerly inhabited but now appropriated to Dancing girls be restored again to the service of Brahmins. The Right Hand caste having given them up to the left hand for their particular use.83

Another caste riot broke on the 6th August of 1786 in Madras. The Left side gave a petition that the Right side ‘had assumed a mark of distinction to which they were not entitled’ and went with ‘tom-tom, spoon and bell’ when going to meet the Governor. The Council ordered that each caste could have the liberty of performing their ceremonies according to their respective customs. The Esplanade was common to both groups.84

Another caste riot broke in the year of 1787 in Madras between the Left and Right hand castes. Disputes took place over Tiruvottiyur temple, to the north of Madras, which was common to both sides, but was managed by the Left side. The Left side complained of interference with their ceremonies at the temple. Kuppu Chetti of left hand caste was stopped by the Paraiyar, and made to get out of his palanquin and walk without his shoes, a great indignity. Most of the arrested rioters belonged to the Left side. Much property was plundered.85

82 Diary and Consultations, 1749-50, pp.87-92.
83 Diary and Consultations, 1749-50, p.87.
Another caste riot broke out in the year of 1789 in Madras on the issue of flags. The Left side claimed that only they could fly silk banners of five colours and the Right side could only use white flags. Both sides complained of looting and armed attacks by the other. The Left side also complained that, in contravention of the prohibition against Building temples, the Right side had built the Krishnasvdmi temple. The President and Council admonished the heads of both castes, which were told that they were responsible for keeping the peace.86

In 1795, another caste riots broke out in the city of Madras on the grounds that Some Left siders poured yellow water (sacred water) on the dancing girls of an Ekambaresvarar temple that was common to both sides. This was followed by an armed attack by some men of the Left side. After Tambu Chetti of left side and the heads of the Kammala castes were arrested because the rioters were not surrendered to the English authorities, the men involved were handed over.87

Causes for the Riots

Various records and writings on the subject agreed that pride, honours, symbols, physical and social space and status were the most important causes for the conflicts and disputes in Madras. However, the new urban economies, which provide new avenues for occupational88 upward social mobility to the merchants were one of the

88 'Occupation' is my word. I use the upward occupational mobility because mobility in caste was not possible.
main causes for the various disputes including the riots.\textsuperscript{89} Numerically, the right hand caste merchants were more dominant than the left hand caste groups. However, because of their influential position and economic status the left hand caste groups started to claim an equitable status on par with the right hand caste. This had brought about constant conflicts between the two groups, which sometimes broke out into open riots. Apparently, the left and right hands were fighting for physical and social space. However, if one goes deeper, the booming economic conditions provided the base for the continuing conflicts between the two. The fact that Madras witnessed most frequently of those caste riots in comparison to the hinterland and other port towns suggest that the flourishing trades and the booming economy of Madras was the main cause of the conflicts.

Another chief cause was urbanization. Since the Chola period, urbanization started to gain importance as the state practised both domestic and foreign trades. Decidedly, it contributed to the weakening of the state and brought about dramatic social change. It especially became importance during the Vijayanagar period and later during the British time.\textsuperscript{90} Most of the scholars who are working on the caste riots like Burton Stein, Arjun Appadurai and S. Arasaratnam etc. agreed that urbanisation was the principal factor for the riots. Arasaratnam says that urbanization factors brought many differences into caste, productions and performance of many caste related ceremonies, weddings and funerals.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{89} Mukund, K., \textit{The Trading World of the Tamil Merchants}, p.148.

\textsuperscript{90} Stein, \textit{Peasant State and Society}, p.204.

\textsuperscript{91} Arasaratnam, \textit{Merchants, Companies and Commerce}, p.256.
Migration also played a very significant role in the disputes because people from Telugu and Kannada region moved in Madras and got new opportunities in the English company as Burton Stein explained. Burton Stein explained that the forging of significant links among a variety of dependent peoples of diverse localities, which could transcend the boundaries of the nadas or basic territorial units, into which the Chola agrarian system was highly fragmented. As the Chola agrarian system spread to new territories, new social groups were assimilated into the existing dual social system, and particularly the Left side.  

Stein argues that the earlier (Chola) period, there was only one recorded instance of major conflict, and frequent hostility was a feature of only the later (Vijayanagar) period. Extending his argument, Stein says that this hostility, in fact, became more pronounced with progressive urbanization in the late Chola and Vijayanagar periods, which essentially meant a realignment of the interests of the two—insofar as groups the occupational absorption/engagement is concerned and changes in the power structure, since the ‘mobile craftsmen and traders who were the core of idarigai groups’ began to gain economic and social advantage vis-a-vis the land based valarigai groups and, finally, Appadurai’s analysis of the basis of the conflict is far more complex and provides a theoretical framework for its context. Outwardly, the disputes were about ‘the respective monopolies of the two sides over certain practices, emblems and spaces’, but the metaphor of a bifurcated social body itself is a ‘root paradigm in South Indian history,’ and ‘the function of this particular metaphor is to

92 Burton Stein, Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India, Delhi, 1980, pp. 173, 182.
93 Burton Stein, Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India, Delhi, 1980, pp. 479-80.
give expression to a wide variety of empirical conflicts and antagonisms. Though the body is divided, he adds, 'the metaphor also simultaneously expresses the unity of the conflicting units'.

94 Appadurai, 'Right and Left hand castes in south India', p. 221.
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