SOCIAL SETTING OF TAMIL COUNTRY BY THE DAWN OF 19th CENTURY

The dawn of 19th C witnessed a spectacle of turmoil and transformation in the history of Tamil Nadu. The fabric of the political unity of Tamil Nadu had been badly damaged after the fall of the later Pandyas, whose place was however taken by the Nayaks of Madurai, the Telugu and Tamil Poligars, the Nawabs of Carnatic and finally by the English East India Company.¹ The ancient ‘native civilization’ had felt the impact of all these different streams that form the rivulets of the overall ocean of Indian Culture.² The inherent power of the native civilization kept alive it’s age old traditions. However, the dictates of the time brought out stress and strains of political conclusions which to an extent had reflected themselves in the contemporary life of the people.³ Politically speaking


‘centralization’ and ‘decentralization’ of power were the two important trends that influenced the history of Tamil Nadu. The threat of external aggression led to centralization at times which, however did not last long.⁴ Linguistic limitations, personal pride and prejudice of the rulers and geographical barriers created a tendency towards decentralization, dividing Tamil Nadu into a number of petty principalities poised against each other for grabbing power.⁵ Political unity in the real sense of the term was not brought out either by the Nawabs of Arcot or by the English East India Company until at least A.D. 1858. As a consequence the social and cultural edifice of Tamil Nadu had little chance of undergoing any drastic transformation.⁶ However, elements of change and continuity were not totally absent. Tamil Nadu was one of the important seats of ancient Tamil Culture, the antiquity of which could be traced back to the first three centuries of the Christian


This culture is the common basis on which the succeeding generations have built up an imposing edifice.

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

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

The word **caste** is a Portuguese one to describe the social division among the people of Hinduism. Caste is also tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those who condemned it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action.\(^8\) Caste as a primordial tie persists in the midst of

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change, retaining its traditional endogamy as the basic primary unit beyond the family. In the Indian languages, the major caste division is called **Varna** and sub-division called **Jati** which in Tamil is termed as **Kulam**.⁹

During the past centuries, castes and sub-castes had been growing in endless numbers both in towns and villages, practising varying degrees of exclusiveness.¹⁰ Inter-caste marriages were not totally absent while inter-dining and social inter-courses outside one’s own caste became restricted. Distinction and inequalities based on a caste were openly or tacitly recognised. Caste violations were dealt with generally by the communities themselves except in serious cases of breach of peace.¹¹ Despite the political changes at the top, the social life at the bottom continued along the traditional lines described above and Tamil Nadu was no exception. In the following pages, major castes and communities of Tamil Nadu would be briefly discussed.

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BRAHMINS

Numerically minority, the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu were immigrants from the North. Among the Hindus, the Brahmins held the first place on account of their descent from God Brahma. Enjoying the liberal grants conferred on by the ruling families, the Brahmins occupied fertile villages situated on the banks of rivers namely Cauveri, Vaigai, Pennar, Tambraparani and their tributaries. Kumbakonam, Tanjore, Srirangam, Chidambaram, Madurai, Tiruvarur, Tirunelveli, Kallidaikurichi and Ambasamudram were some of the major Brahmin settlements. Among them majority were Saivites. The Vaishnava Brahmins were living in Srirangam, Sripurumpudur, Sri Mushnam, Nanguneri, Tirukkurungudi and the Nava-Tiruppati.

Among the Brahmins of Tamil Nadu, Kanialars were important. They formed a separate class of Smartha Brahmins.


14. Nava-Tiruppati - Nine Vishnu Temples situated on either side of river Tambraparani. They are Alwartirunagari, Erattai Tiruppathi (two temples), Nattam, Perumkulam, Srivaikuntam, Thenthirupperai, Thirupulinkudy and Thirukalur.
They did not inter-marry with any other class of Smartha Brahmins, though they ate with them. A large number of them wore a mark on their forehead like the Vaishnava Brahmins and served as cooks and menial servants in the big temple at **Srirangam**. Their women adopted the Vaishnava women's style of wearing clothes.\(^{15}\) The Vaishnava Brahmins would not allow them to eat in their houses, though they ate rice and cakes prepared by them in temples and offered to God as **Prasadam**.

The Vaishnavas, though professed to constitute a distinct section were having divisions like the Tamil Vaishnava Brahmins and the Telugu Vaishnava Brahmins. The Telugu speaking Vaishnavas did not mix with the Tamil speaking Vaishnavas and retained some of the Telugu customs which were brought with them from the Telugu country during the Vijayanagar rule.\(^{16}\) There were two distinct groups of Tamil Vaishnava Brahmins - **the Vadakalais** (northerners) and **Tenkalais** (southerners) who were easily distinguished by the marks on

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their forehead. The Vadakalais put a ‘U’ shaped mark and the Tenkalais a ‘Y’ shaped mark. There were similar points of differences between Vadakalais and Tenkalais which sometimes led to bitter quarrels in connection with temple worship.17 Such sectarian differences exist even now.

According to the Jesuit sources, the Brahmins were proud and arrogant due to the fact that the whole world is under the control of Gods. Those Gods are under the control of the Mantras (sanskritic divine texts). These Mantras are under the control of the Brahmins.18 As a distinct group, the Brahmins carefully avoided contact with men below their rank for fear of defilement. Jesuit sources furnished fairly a good account of Brahmins and their attitude towards others who were below them in the social hierarchy. They depicted their dexterous dealings in the following words: “The Brahmins were great imposters, invented new fables daily and passed among the public. One of the artifices was to persuade the public that their idols are like men in order that they might be

plentifully provided with ghee. If the people failed in their offerings, the Brahmins threatened them with the anger of the Gods.\(^{19}\) They convinced others that only merit on earth was doing good to them. Even for grave crimes committed, they were exempted from capital punishments owing to the feeling that to kill a cow or a Brahmin was an unpardonable crime.”\(^{20}\)

During the period under review, it was the practice of the rulers to allot **Inam lands** (rent-free lands) and constructed houses at free of cost for them. Because of their cleverness, the Brahmins had wisely made it a rule that if anyone who undertook to build an **Agraharam**, he must provide the new inhabitants with even the least items of furniture, in order that he might acquire an immense merit.\(^{21}\) The Brahmins mostly lived in their own **Agraharams, Caturvedi Mangalams** and occupied

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21. Revenue Department, G.O. No.1462, 7\(^{th}\) September 1878, para 5.
the highest temporal positions. They lived in separate streets meant for them, which were the cleanest, perhaps the healthiest sites in the whole locality. They maintained their houses very clean, well smeared with cowdung. The Brahmins due to their 

Acharam accepted neither dish nor water from the non-caste Hindus. It was enough for them to incur pollution if people belonged to the lower-castes saw the dishes which they prepared or the vessels in which their food was cooked. As a clean caste the Brahmins were employed as cooks by the local chieftains, but they would not serve their masters who were all Sudras to whom their status would not permit to serve. Many of them were cooks even to the Jesuits who all had nothing but admiration for their simplicity and clean habits. To maintain balance of mind and equanimity, they avoided liquor at all cost. To them, drunkenness was a vice and drunkards among them would immediately be expelled from

22. Baramahal Records, Section III, pp.4-5.

23. Acharam means religious rituals practised by the Brahmins.


their caste. Hence there was no wonder that the natives would never undertake any serious business without the counsel and guidance of the Brahmins.

**VELLALAS**

Among the non-Brahmins the most dominant caste was the **Vellalas.** Besides the Brahmins, the Vellalas constituted a part of the elite group in Tamil Nadu. The Vellalas were the great land-owning caste and even today they are strongly represented in Tamil Nadu. Most of them were cultivators while a few leading men served as **Dalawais** (Commanders of the army) during the Nayak period. Among the Sudras, the **Jesuit** sources give them the first place. They were divided into several sub-sects like **Tontaimantala**


Vellalas, Karkatta Vellalas, Saiva Vellalas, Nangudi Vellalas, Pandya Vellalas, Choliea Vellalas, Nanchilnattu Vellalas, etc. depending either on the locality of their origin or the actual place where they were lived.

More Brahmin than the Brahmins, the Saiva-Vellalas a sub-sect held themselves aloof from the castes below them and maintained strict vegetarianism and a highly

36. K.K.Pillai, Studies in Indian History with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu (Madras : Published by the Author, 1979), pp. 509-512.
sanskritized ritual life.\textsuperscript{37} Due to their strict adherence to vegetarianism and the devout way of life, they vied with Brahmins in all pursuits, temporal and spiritual. To spread their gospel \textbf{Saiva Siddantha}, the choicest product of the Dravidian intellect, they had their own Mutts and other religious and educational institutions which were instrumental in dragging their philosophy. Owing to such doctrine, they lived apart to maintain their purity and integrity.

Contemporary sources indicate a fascinating sect among them namely \textbf{Kottai Vellalas} of Srivaikuntam in the Tirunelveli District who were surrounded by a \textbf{Kottai} (fortress) - a mud enclosure which enabled them to live in isolation without much intervention from outside.\textsuperscript{38} They never allowed their women to cross their threshold with a view to avoid others making eyes at them. After marriage, no women of that caste might be seen by men except those of her husband, father or uncle. The fortress was demolished recently and the Kottai Vellalas have mingled with the Saiva Vellalas.


Another sect of Vellalas who were basically different from Saiva Vellalas namely Konku Vellalas who were predominantly non-vegetarians and were found mainly in the Konku region. Among the Konku Vellalas there were several sub-castes, the Centalais (red headed men) the Pataitalais (leaders of the army) the Vellikai (the silver hand), the Pavalam katti (the wearers of coral) the Malayalis (foot of the hill) and the Tolakkadhu (ears with big holes) etc. They were sub-divided into 64 kulams or kuttams (class). Each Kuttam had its own Kula Teyvam (family deity) and its own totem symbol. Marriage between the members of the same Kuttam was prohibited. A distinct feature about the Konku Vellalas was that they gave prominence to barbers who officiated at their marriage rites. They were the leading cultivating caste of the Konku region.

The Vellalas in general followed a more ritually Sanskritic style of life and proclaimed themselves as Vaishyas. When the British took over the administration of the Madras Presidency, more than 75 per cent of the recruits for the white collared jobs were drawn from this community. It was only

after the execution of Thanapathy Siva Subramania Pillai of this caste, an associate of Vira Pandya Kattabomma Nayak\textsuperscript{40} (Poligar of Panchalamkuruchi), the British changed their policy. Change of loyalty led to their estrangement from the British and this accounted for their political setback.

**NADARS**

Formerly called as Shanars, the Nadars have perhaps most clearly evidenced the effects of change in the past two centuries.\textsuperscript{41} Considered to be the most defiling and degraded of all castes by caste Hindus, the Nadars as toddy tappers, climbers of the palmyra palm, suffered severe social disabilities and were one of the most economically depressed communities in Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{42} The Nadars were considered ritually impure because of their calling as toddy-tappers. They


were forbidden entry into the Hindu temples and their use of public well was strictly prohibited. Though the Nadars had access to the streets of the Brahmin quarters (Agraharam), they did experience prohibitions of spatial distance.\(^{43}\) In 1872, when the Nadars tried to enter the Subramaniaswamy Temple at Tiruchendur they were assaulted and successfully prevented from entering in it. Similarly their attempt to enter Madurai Meenakshi Temple was also a failure one. Again in 1895 their attempts to enter Tiruthangal and Sivakasi temples respectively failed due to apathy, official and public.\(^{44}\) They lived in separate habitations just outside the main village. They were denied entry into the educational institutions. They were not allowed to even enter the court of justice. In South Tamil Nadu, the Nadar womenfolk were obliged to go with their breasts uncovered.\(^{45}\) All these inhuman activities forced them to think about social respect and religious conversion as a token of social protest.


In order to escape from tyranny and social stigma, large number of them became converts to Christianity. A number of Christian settlements appeared in Tamil Nadu mainly dwelled by Nadars. **Bishop Caldwell** writes that the Nadars were docile and tractable, peculiarly fitted to appreciate the advantages of sympathy, guidance and protection and were peculiarly accessible to Christian influence.\(^{46}\) The advantages of Christianity became rapidly apparent to the Nadars as the material conditions of their Christian neighbours began to improve.\(^{47}\) The establishment of British rule in India was a real boon to this people, the value of which they could not realize until Christian Missionary education opened their eyes. In case of oppression arising among the earlier converts, it was demonstrated that even the Nadar with the advise of his Christian teacher could obtain justice and enjoy protection.\(^{48}\) The Missionaries were able to secure mass converts from this community. **Caldwell, Samuel Sawyer** and **G.U. Pope** were all


concentrating their attention on Christionising this caste. However, considerable number of them continued to be Hindus.

**MARAVAS**

The **Maravas** were found chiefly in Tinnevelly and Ramnad Districts, where they occupied the tracts bordering on the coast from Cape Comorin to the northern limits of the Ramnad Zamindari. The Maravas must have been one of the first of the Dravidian tribes that penetrated into the South of the Indian Peninsula, and like the Kallars of Madurai and Ramnad they had been little affected by Brahmanical influence.\(^{49}\) In the beginning they gave the British a tough time. It is recorded that to this class belonged most of the Poligars or feudal chieftains who disputed with the English. They were unanimous about their indifference to tilling and toiling and indicate in clear terms that they were for looting and easy living.\(^{50}\) They deemed themselves superior to Nadars,


Pallars and Paraiyas who were all considered as untouchables and prohibited from entering temples of any kind. They had not only free access to temples but also they themselves were guardians of many temples like Rameswaram. They were incharge of Kaval for which they were entitled a Mamool by which every householder or occupier of a mud hut must pay the Maravas half a Panam and those who were the owners of cattle must pay one Panam per year called as Kudikaval. Though usually cultivators, some of the Maravas were expert cattle–lifters in the Presidency. According to the 1891 Census, the Maravas formed only 10 per cent of the population of Tamil Nadu and yet they committed seventy per cent of the decoities which had occurred in the previous five years. It is noted in the Madras Police Report, 1903 that a large section of the


52. Kaval means watch and ward duty.

53. Mamool means usual customary payment.

54. Panam - means traditional Indian money.


Marava population in Tinnevelly District was criminal by predilection and training. On the principle of **Set a thief to catch a thief**, the Maravas were paid to keep their hands from picking and stealing, and to make restitution for any thefts that might possibly take place, not withstanding the vigilance of the watchmen.57

Among them, the **Kallar** was an important sub-caste whose men were referred to as ladrones (thieves) because several individuals of it formerly professed robbery.58 Though most of them turned Christians, still some of them retained their former appellation.59 Decoity was their favourite pastime. By nature they were so implacable that they would inflict severe punishments upon themselves just to retaliate such punishments on their enemies. The law of retaliation was rigorously observed in the Kallar dominated areas.60 If there happens to be a quarrel and one of the

parties cuts his ear or pulls his own eye out, or kills himself, the other party must inflict the like punishment upon himself or on some of his relations.61 The women also carried this barbarious custom for a long time. For a slight affront or a biting remark, they will go and break their heads against the door of the offending person, who is obliged to inflict exactly the same punishment upon herself.62 If one woman poisons herself by drinking the juice of a venomous herb or plant, the other who was the cause of it, is obliged to do the same and should she prove reluctant to do the rest would set fire on her house, ran away with her cattle and perpetually torment her till she felt full satisfaction.63 This was only one side of a coin; they were very good soldiers and a Marava would worth about an army. In 1656, they proved their might by expelling the Muslims with the support of Tirumala Nayak.64 During the South Indian Rebellion organised


64. R. Sathyanatha Aiyar, History of the Nayaks of Madurai op.cit., pp.95-96.
against the English, they proved their valour and chivalry beyond doubt.

**VANNIYARS**

Another important cultivating caste which can trace its history to a hoary past is Palli (Vanniyars) which is said to denote their Pallava origin. They claimed their descent from solar and lunar race. According to Nelson, the Vanniyars were a small and obscure agricultural caste, but there is reason to believe that they are descendants of ancestors, who in former times, held a good position among the tribes of South India. An inscription of A.D. 1189 refers to one Vanniya Nayan who made a grant of land to the Vishnu temple at Manimankalam. Mackenzie Manuscripts also refer two Vanniya chieftains, Kandavarayan and Cintavarayan who were contemporaries of Krishna Devaraya. They claimed to be Kshatriyas assumed the titles like Nayanar, Varma, Odayar and


Kountar. Some of them even wore sacred thread to denote their Kshatriya status, though it was denied by the higher castes like Brahmins.

**KAIKOLAS**

The **Kaikolas** were found chiefly in Coimbatore and Erode areas. They were expert weavers with their skill and dexterity in weaving fine clothes.⁶⁸

They had their own rules and regulations which were scrupulously enforced. The guild which regulated their trade and industry not only controlled them but also protected them by assuring employment.⁶⁹ They were fond of drinking and gambling.⁷⁰ Many among them were extremely opulent and had extensive trade relations with far off lands like Ceylon,

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⁷⁰. Francis Buchanan, _op.cit._, p.474.
Singapore, Burma and Malaya where they had extensive trading centres for their manufactured goods.\textsuperscript{71}

**RAJUS AND PATNULKARARS**

Another influential community in Madurai and Rajapalayam were the Rajus. They were said to have migrated from *Vijayanagaram*.\textsuperscript{72} The descendants of the original emigrants had served under the southern chieftains especially *Tirumalai Nayak*. The Patnulkarars or silk thread weavers from Sourashtra (Gujarat) is another immigrant community. They were intelligent and hard working people, made all efforts to improve their material conditions and raised their educational standards.

**KADAIYANS**

The name *Kadaiyan* means last or lowest, and they seem to be a sub-division of the Pallas. The Kadaiyans were described as lime (shell) gatherers of the coastal areas from


\textsuperscript{72} Edgar Thurston, *op.cit.*, Vol. VI, p.248.
whose ranks the pearl divers are in part recruited at the present day. Living on the coast of Coromandel, now they are mainly Christians and their ancestors were converted through the work of St. Francis Xavier, a Catholic Missionary.

PARAIYAS

The Paraiyas originally belonged to a pre-Dravidian stock and a large portion of them were converted to Christianity. Caldwell derives the name Paraiya from the Tamil word Parai - means drum, a musical instrument, as some of them act as drummers at marriages, funerals, and village festivals and on occasions like governmental or commercial announcements are proclaimed. They were found throughout Tamil Nadu and also in the southern extremity of the native State of Travancore. Baramahal Records refer to them as untouchables who were practically kept outside the pale of Hindu society. According to the Rev. Da Costa, a Catholic

73. S. Manickam, Studies in Missionary History: Refelctions on a Culture Contact, op.cit., p.61.

Missionary, their lowliness was mainly due to the habit of beef-eating and consumption of liquor. They were noted for their uncleanliness and no one would either eat in their houses or touch them of their pots or vessels.\textsuperscript{75} Their very presence was deemed to be defiling. No one would speak to them except from a distance as if they were infected with plague. They were not tolerated in the neighbourhood of other castes and hence their dwellings were in the outskirits of villages.\textsuperscript{76} They were mostly serfs, treated with scorn and contempt, used to be humiliated, even beaten and they had even no right either to complain or seek redress of their grievances. They were strictly forbidden to cross a street in which Brahmins lived.\textsuperscript{77} Their low conduct, their habit of drinking, their fondness for animal sacrifices, their unclean habits and customs and menial and servile occupations were all responsible for their despicable position.\textsuperscript{78}

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\textsuperscript{78}. George W. Spencer, (ed.), \textit{Temples, Kings and Peasants Perceptions of South India’s Past}, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.95-115.
PALLAS

The Pallas were a class of agricultural labourers found throughout Tamil Nadu. The name is said to be derived from Pallam - a low-lying area where wet cultivation was carried on. They were found in almost every village labouring for the benefit of the higher castes. They were addicted to drunkenness and debauchery which were mainly responsible for their degradation. They were not even permitted to complain of their low status.

THE ARTISAN CASTE

The artisan caste which consisted of five occupational sub-sects such as Tattar (goldsmith) Kannar (brasssmith) Tachar (carpenter), Kal Tachar (stone mason) and Kollar or Karumar (blacksmith) which claimed to have descended from


81. G.O. No. 716, Revenue Department, 3rd May 1872, p.1220, para 23.
Viswakarma, the divine architect.\textsuperscript{82} Owing to their technical skill and know how, they formed the basis of village economy and manufactured all tools – agricultural and industrial that were needed for the country folk. For the service they rendered, they were entitled rent free land and Kalavacam for which they were obliged to make and repair the tools that were essential for the rural folk.\textsuperscript{83}

NOMADIC TRIBES OF TAMIL NADU

Apart from the major caste sub-divisions, there were a number of nomadic and savage tribes such as Kuravar, Ottar, Irular, Malayali, Badagar, Palliyans and Kadar. The Kuravars were divided into a number of endogamous sects such as Dhabbai Kuravar, Uppu Kuravar, Karuveppilai Kuravar and Kavalkara Kuravar mainly on the basis of their occupation.\textsuperscript{84} Dhabbai (split bamboo) Kuravars as their name

\textsuperscript{82} F. Robert Spencer (ed.), Religion and Change in Contemporary Asia (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp.112-119.


\textsuperscript{84} P. Subramanian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.44.
indicates earned their livelihood by making basket and similar other articles out of bamboos which they collected from the neighbouring forests. The **Uppu** (salt) **Kuravars** as their name denotes were predominantly salt merchants and along with salt, they also carried their other merchandise such as tamarind and jaggary from place to place on the back of the bullocks or donkeys. **Karuveppilai** (leaves of curry plant) **Kuravars** carried the leaves of curry leaf plant to inland from the place where they were available in abundance. **Kavalkara** (watch and ward) **Kuravars** looked after kaval duties for which they were paid 12 **Madras measures**\(^{85}\) of grain and a sheep per year from each household and rupees six from every garden of coconut and other trees.\(^{86}\)

Another interesting nomadic tribe **Ottar** was divided into four main sub-sects on the basis of their occupation such as **Kallu** (stone) **Ottar**, **Mannu** (earth-digging) **Ottar**, **Maram** (tree-cutting) **Ottar** and **Uppu** (salt) **Ottar**.\(^{87}\) They normally

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85. **Madras Measure** has a capacity of 104 cubic inches and contains 118 tolas of rice struck or 128 tolas heaped.


87. Baramahal Records, Section VII, pp. 36-37.
were migratory in their habits, shifting their settlements now and then in search of labour and forming temporary encampments on the outskirts of towns and villages or in the vicinity of work in which they were for the time being engaged.\textsuperscript{88} They were polygamous and were known for their intemperance which the natives despised of.\textsuperscript{89}

Apart from these, there was a savage tribe, Malayalis largely found in Shevaroys, Kalroyans, Chitteries, Kollimalais and Pachaimalais.\textsuperscript{90} They were divided into three main sub-sects - the Peria Malayalis of Kalroyans and Chitteries, the Pachaimalayalis of Attur and Trichinopoly and Kollimalayalis of Namakkal and Rasipuram. Each sub-sect was divided into a large number of exogamous clans called Vakuppus which regulated them in matters of dress, diet and other ceremonial matters like marriage and death.\textsuperscript{91} Each group had a priest of

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\textsuperscript{89} Abbe Dubois, \textit{op.cit.}, p.185-191.
\textsuperscript{91} Edgar Thurston, \textit{op.cit.}, Vol. IV, pp.427-429.
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its own who presided over and officiated all their ceremonies.\textsuperscript{92} Despite many threats and challenges, they retained their identity as a clan due to their rigorous rules and regulations.

The other fascinating hill tribe was \textbf{Batagars}. They were believed to be descended from Mysore who migrated to the Nilgris three centuries ago owing to severe famine or political turmail.\textsuperscript{93} They had their own exogamous \textit{kulas} (sects) of which \textit{Mari, Madhane, Kasturi} and \textit{Belli} were important. Polygamy was permitted and hence among them plurality of wives was common. Buffaloes were the basis of their livelihood and their economy was based on the number of buffaloes they possessed.\textsuperscript{94}

\textbf{Kadaras} were also a hill tribe with little or no knowledge of cultivation. They were also nomadic in habits,

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\item \textsuperscript{93} David G. Mandelbaum (ed.), \textit{The Growth of Language, Culture and Personality} (Wisconsin: Mensa Publications, 1941), pp.219-238.
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living in small communities in the dense forests and shifting from one place to another in search of food.\textsuperscript{95} They were good hunters and relied on forest products like wax, honey, ginger, turmeric for their subsistence. They lived mainly on succulent roots, bamboo seeds, fowls, rock snakes, deer, rats, wild pigs and sheep. They were innocent, polygamous and easy-going. As primitive and innocent tribe, they elicited the sympathy and support of the Christian missionaries.\textsuperscript{96}

Another significant tribal community which was confined to the Nilgiri region was the \textbf{Todas}. The study about the polyandrous Todas\textsuperscript{97} has been of special attraction because of their marriage practices, buffalo-centered economy, caucasoid physical features and barrel-shaped house pattern. Though they

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\textsuperscript{97} Henry Harkness, \textit{Description of Singular Aboriginal Race inhabiting the Summit of the Neilgherry Hills or Blue Mountains of Coimbatore in the Southern Peninsula of India} (London : Smith, Elder & Co., 1932), pp.12-25.
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were innocent and easy-going, they practised female infanticide.\textsuperscript{98} They practised pantheism and made buffalo sacrifices in order to satisfy the tribal deities.\textsuperscript{99} The rapid decline in the Toda population was due to the prevalence of diseases, the detrimental sexual customs and administrative irregularities. The venereal disease was the main cause of low birth rate and sterility among most of the women.\textsuperscript{100}

Another significant tribe which lived in the Nilgiri hills was \textbf{Kotas}. Polyandry was the order of the day in the Kota society where the elder brother falls in ill or gets incapacitated or dies, the next brother takes his place. The other brothers thus function as secondary husbands.\textsuperscript{101}

The **Palliyans** were a nomadic tribe, who for the most part rove in small parties through the jungle-clad gorges that fringe the Western Ghats in the Tinnevelly and Madurai areas.\(^{102}\) They lived entirely on nuts and roots and various kinds of gum they gathered in the forest on the slopes of the hills above their settlement. The Palliyans were divided into sections and exogamous clans. Marriages between cross-cousins as well as between the maternal uncle and niece were permissible. Mates were acquired through negotiations or by elopement and these people prefer adult marriage. The common form of marriage was monogamy, but polygamy was also practised.\(^{103}\) The remarriage of both widowed and divorced persons of either sex was permissible.

In addition to the Tamil caste groups, several non-Tamil castes were also living in Tamil Nadu. Most of them migrated into Tamil Nadu during the Vijayanagar period.

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VADUGARS

The Vadugars (northerners) were the Telugu immigrants in Tamil Nadu. During the Nayak period, these Vadugars settled in different parts of Tamil Nadu in considerable number.\(^{104}\) They were recruited into the army by Viswanatha Nayak of Madurai. Similar the case with Tottiyar who were Telugu cultivators settled in Ettayapuram and Panchalamkuruchi in Tinnevelly District. Kattu Tottiyar was a sub-caste inhabited in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

MARAKKAYARS

A number of Muslim communities have also carved out a niche for them in Tamil Nadu. The Marakkayars were the immigrants from Arabia. They are of a mixed Hindu and Muslim origin usually engaged in trade. The word Marakkayar was derived from the Arabic word Markab means boat.\(^{105}\) They settled in the coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. They seemed to be distinct from the Lebbais, another sect of the Muslims in several respects.


LEBBAIS

The Lebbais\textsuperscript{106} were a Muslim caste of partly Tamil origin. The members of this community were traders and betel-vines growers. Their first colony appears to have been at Kayalpatnam in the Tinnevelly District.\textsuperscript{107} Tamil was their mother tongue and they have produced a few reputed Tamil poets. They were very orthodox. For the education of the Lebbai and Marakkayar children, religious books like Koran had been published in Tamil with Arabic characters. The origin of this sort of hybrid literature may be traced to Kayalpatnam, Melapalayam, Vaniyambadi, Ambur and other important towns in Tamil Nadu.

THE FAMILY

During the period under review, 'Family' the smallest unit of the social fabric, functioned as an established institution. The father exercised the dominant authority over the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{106} P. Tarachand, \textit{Influence of Islam on Indian Culture} (Allahabad : The Indian Press, 1946), pp.32-33.
\item \textsuperscript{107} Aldoricci, \textit{The Travels of Marcopolo} (New Delhi : Asian Educational Services, 1994), pp.323-324.
\end{itemize}
family.\(^{108}\) The Muslim impact does not seem to have altered this basic concept of the family life of Tamil Nadu.

The Hindus constituted majority population who lived in villages. They constructed their houses very near to the water courses. In the case of Brahmins, the rites and rituals were performed on the basis of Griyasutras (Hindu holy hymns).\(^{109}\) The high-caste non-Brahmins like the Saiva Vellalas imitated Brahminical way of life. The father held undisputed sway over the family. Monogamy was the order of the day.\(^{110}\) The women folk had no social equality and they were denied entry into public places. The law of primogeniture was in practice. Only male members of the family got property rights. There was no provision for widow-remarriage. In public life only the voice of the male was heard. This grim picture began to change a little after the establishment of British administration and the introduction of Western education.\(^{111}\)


However, the western concept of family and family life had little influence on the traditional Hindu concepts. Western education, ideals, customs and manners were still unfamiliar with the people of Tamil Nadu. The European officials were more feared than loved. So much so, closer contacts between Parangi Durai (European) and the natives had not developed. The social exclusiveness of the European community was a matter of necessity as most of them were military officials, rather than civilians.\(^\text{112}\) Nevertheless this social exclusiveness appears to have been a blessing in disguise, for the European settlements in those days served as the hotbed of vices.\(^\text{113}\)

**DEVADASI SYSTEM**

One of the oldest means of religious propaganda was the employment of women artisans who had specialised in the arts of **Bharatha Natyam**, vocal and instrumental music. These


\(^\text{113}\) Public Despatches to England, 12\(^{\text{th}}\) April 1861, Vol.35, pp.151-152.
dancing girls who were dedicated to the temples were called as **Devadasis**\(^{114}\) (temple prostitutes). Endowments were made to the temples for the maintenance of these Devadasis.\(^{115}\) **Devadasi System** was a common feature in almost all major Brahminical temples particularly the Saivite ones. It was a matter of prestige for the temples to employ Devadasis in a good number.\(^{116}\) The famous **Rajarajeshwara Temple** at **Tanjore** had 400 Devadasis and the temple of **Palakol** had 500 devadasis during the reign of the Imperial Cholas.\(^{117}\) During the Vijayanagar administration in Tamil Nadu, the Devadasi system continued with the same vigour as it did in pre-Muslim


days. They also conferred considerable social recognition on the Devadasis.

Society did not care much for their lapses, just in the same way the Greeks and Romans had tolerated those of their vestal virgins. The temples however, did not get any statutory percentage or economic gain out of their sacred prostitution as did those in ancient Greece, Rome and Asia Minor.

The origin of Devadasi System is not known, but it is very curious to note that all ancient cultures seem to have


at some time or other associated dance with religion.\textsuperscript{122} During the medieval period, this profession was supported by the kings for revenue out of which a police force was maintained. Those women who involved in this profession had enjoyed a considerable social status and position. They were allowed to meet the wives of the kings and were even allowed to stay with them. It seems that they were even allowed to chew betel with them a thing no other person may do, no matter what his rank may be.\textsuperscript{123} They led a life of cultural case and pleasure and provided amusement and intellectual companionship to those who could afford the luxury.\textsuperscript{124}

After the disintegration of the Vijayanagar Empire they lost their social position and influence due to lack of patronage and support without which they became victims of pleasure and pelf in the succeeding centuries. In 19\textsuperscript{th}C, in \textit{Tanjore}, \textit{Pudukottai} and other places, they continued to enjoy royal

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Rajatananda Das Gupta, “The Institution of Devadasi in Assam”, \textit{Journal of Indian History}, Vol. XLIII, Part II August 1965, p.346.
\item \textsuperscript{123} T.V. Mahalingam, \textit{Administration and Social Life Under the Vijayanagar} (Madras : University of Madras, 1940), p.268.
\item \textsuperscript{124} K.A.N. Sastrì, \textit{The Colas} (Madras : University of Madras, 1955), p.554.
\end{itemize}
patronage. In the Chingleput District, it was a custom among the weavers to dedicate the eldest daughter to be a Devadasi.\textsuperscript{125} In some cases, the pregnant women in order to obtain a safe delivery made a vow to dedicate the child, if it turned out to be a girl to the temple service. Many girls were forcibly removed to the temple on account of their exceptional beauty and charm to be utilised for the services of God. During the period under review, this class formed a separate caste, having its own laws of inheritance, its own customs and rules of etiquette and its own panchayats.\textsuperscript{126} Only a small percentage of them served in the temples for which they received payment in cash which was too meagre for a decent living. Hence majority of them were forced to earn their bread by means of prostitution.\textsuperscript{127}

In course of time; it has become “a great piece of injustice, a great wrong, a violation of human rights, a practice highly revolting to human nature and countenance”. Under this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{125} C.S. Crooke, \textit{Manual of Chingleput} (Madras : Government Press, 1879), pp.121-145.
\item \textsuperscript{126} Edgar Thurston, \textit{op.cit.}, Vol.I, p.127.
\item \textsuperscript{127} A.R. Cottan (ed.), \textit{Muthulakshmi Reddi, “Devadasi”, Key of Progress} (Clarandon : Oxford University Press, 1930), p.179.
\end{itemize}
system, young girls were dedicated to the temple and they were nurtured under unhealthy notions of religion and taught to look upon prostitution as their caste’s duty and dharma.\textsuperscript{128} Muthulekshmi Reddi, the veteran champion of the Devadasis, wanted to do away with the practice despite much opposition in the Madras Legislature. Thanks to her undaunted will, ceaseless efforts and perpetual persuasion the Bill was passed on 1\textsuperscript{st} February 1929.\textsuperscript{129} It was a dead letter for long. It was totally abolished only by the Madras Act XXXI of 1947 by which the dedication of Hindu women to the temples was announced as illegal.

SATI

Sati was a form of religious suicide. One of the worst ordeals which the women were forced to undergo was Sati.\textsuperscript{130} The word really means a good or chaste wife. A good wife was supposed not to survive after her husband. The origin


\textsuperscript{129} New India, 13\textsuperscript{th} February 1930.

of Sati is said to be very remote.\textsuperscript{131} It was not universal in Tamil Nadu. It was confined mostly in Tanjore and Trichirappalli Districts alone, though a few cases occurred in other districts too. In the beginning of 19\textsuperscript{th} C, public officers were authorised to allow the performance of the rite, if it was applied for. They were shocked to see the ‘abominable rite’. The widow was administered intoxicating drugs to get her consent when she was in a state of drunkenness. Such conditions provoked the sympathy of some of the officers who wanted to extirpate this abominable rite. In Madras the proposal to abolish Sati was first brought forward by \textbf{G.M. Lushington}, who as Magistrate of Tanjore in 1813 and of Trichirappalli in 1819 recommended its suppression.\textsuperscript{132} In a letter to the government he described how a widow had burnt herself in Tanjore before it could be known to the police and he requested the government to authorise him to prevent the rite. The Governor-in-Council highly commended his act but did not dare to prohibit the custom altogether at that juncture. However the Collector was directed to report the number

\textsuperscript{131} Thompson and Garret, \textit{Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India} (London: Richard and Clay Sons, 1934), pp.43-45.

\textsuperscript{132} Judicial Consultations, 14\textsuperscript{th} August 1813, No.2.
of widows who had fallen victims of such a practice since the establishment of English court at Tanjore.\footnote{William Hickey, \textit{The Tanjore Mahratta Principality in South India} (Madras : St. Thomas Press, 1874), pp.4-28.} In response, Lushington submitted that not less than a hundred persons had fallen victims to the ‘infernal rite’ between A.D. 1813 and A.D. 1819.\footnote{Rajkumar (ed.), \textit{Widowhood : A Curse To Humanity} (New Delhi : Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2000), pp.176-178.} The Government permitted the Collector to use all practicable means to dissuade the widows and their relatives from continuing this practice, but they did not allow the Magistrate to go beyond mere persuasion.\footnote{Judicial Despatches to England, Vol. III, 1\textsuperscript{st} March 1815, Para 93-94.}

Humanitarian and Missionary societies in England evinced great enthusiasm in curbing this practice and it was in such an atmosphere that enquiries on \textit{Sati} were instituted in Madras. The British Magistrate in Tanjore wrote a letter in 1821 that 24 instances of this ‘horrid sacrifice’ had occurred in the last 18 months.\footnote{Judicial Consultations, 27\textsuperscript{th} July 1929, Nos. 11,12.} In the meantime, matters took a

136. Judicial Consultations, 27\textsuperscript{th} July 1929, Nos. 11,12.
different turn when Lord William Bentinck became the Governor-General. He issued his famous minute on Sati in 1829 by which Sati was made illegal. As soon as the Regulation XVII of 1829 for prohibiting Sati was announced, Stephen Rumbold Lushington, the then Governor of Madras wrote a minute: “the practice of Sati, of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus; illegal and punishable in the criminal court”. After 1830, the cases of Sati were very rare and a thing of the past.

CHILD MARRIAGE

Another cause which curbed the free growth of women was child marriage which fortunately was least prevalent in the Madras Presidency. The practice of child marriage was common among Brahmins and other high caste Hindus. Among the Brahmins the usual age of marriage was between 7 and 10. The average age of marriage for female among Brahmins was between 6 and 7. In addition to the Brahmins, among


the non-Brahmin castes like Kapus and Komatis, child-marriage was in vogue. The plight of the married children was very pathetic. The child marriage crushed the victim out of shape, made them bleeding profusely and in some cases crippled them totally despite surgery.\(^\text{139}\) Early marriage led to early maternity and early maternity was a great evil.

**Dr. Mrs. Muthulakshmi Reddi** while referring to their plight pointed out that “the child marriage robbed off the brightest period of their girlhood and youth; from a period of infancy, the girls were forced into the period of producing infants and the physical strain in some cases of young mothers brought even mental disorders.”\(^\text{140}\)

**WIDOWHOOD**

The unhealthy result of early marriages and ill-sorted marriages was child-widowhood. Widows in Hindu society were the victims of perpetual misery and humiliation and were not


allowed to remarry however young they might be.\textsuperscript{141} Widows were held in much less respect than other women, and when they happen to have no children they were generally looked upon with the utmost scorn. The very fact of meeting a widow was calculated to bring ill-luck.\textsuperscript{142} They were called \textbf{Munda}, a reproachable term which means “shaven-head”. A widow has to be in mourning till her death. The signs of mourning were as follows: she was expected to have her head shorn once a month; she was not permitted to wear jewels; she must not wear coloured clothes; she must not put saffron on her face or body or mark her forehead. Further more, she was forbidden to take part in any amusement or to attend family festivities such as marriage feasts, the ceremony of \textbf{Upanayana} and others; for her very presence would be considered as an evil omen.\textsuperscript{143} Despite all their miseries and humiliation, they generally were not allowed

\begin{itemize}
\item[142.] A.L. Basham, \textit{The Wonder that was India} (Calcutta : Rupa & Co., 1967), pp.187-189.
\item[143.] K.S. Venkataramani, \textit{The Indian Village} (Madurai : Svetaranya Ashram, 1932), pp.15-22.
\end{itemize}
to remarry.\textsuperscript{144} Still an unexpected belief also persisted among some of the non-Brahmin castes that the superiority of a caste depended upon the strictness with which it enforced the observance of puritan widowhood.\textsuperscript{145} It is reported that the \textbf{Kottai Vellalas} of \textbf{Srivaikuntam} in the Tinnevelly District mercilessly shut the widows within a high mud wall\textsuperscript{146} where no men were permitted to enter. The widows were required to devote themselves to the most severe austerity, so that they could realise the high hopes of meeting their parents without delay. These women were denied even of elementary comforts.\textsuperscript{147} They were given a little rice, herbs, roots and some water. No fresh cloth or water for bath was supplied. In consequence, the unfortunate widows never lived for more then six months.\textsuperscript{148}

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\textsuperscript{144.} Robert L. Hardgrave, \textit{op.cit.}, p.107.

\textsuperscript{145.} S. Manickam, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.108-114.

\textsuperscript{146.} V.S. Padmanabha Ayyar, \textit{A Short Account of the Tinnevelly District} (Tinnevelly : Palayamcottah Printing Press, 1933), pp.20-21.

\textsuperscript{147.} Nilkan Perumal, \textit{In a Corner of India} (Madras : R.J. Ram and Co., 1941), p.41.

\textsuperscript{148.} Revenue Sundries, 1812, Vol.38, p.9.
FEMALE INFANTICIDE

Female Infanticide was in practice in Tamil Nadu from earlier times. One of the evil consequences of this practice was that a sizable number of young girls became the victims. This inhuman practice was prevalent among the Maravas of Tinnevelly District and the tribal people of Nilgris. Much of the miseries of women were mitigated by Missionary activities and social legislations of the British Government. Sati, Child Marriage, Female Infanticide, etc. were mercilessly put down by the British. The Missionary ladies did much for the emancipation of the secluded women. They also started schools for girls. In women’s liberation, the Christian Missionary ladies were great pioneers. In this regard, Amy Carmichael, the founder of Donavur Ashram in the Tinnevelly District deserves special mention. Eventhough secular historians have failed to place on record the single-minded devotion with which these Missionary


ladies worked for the emancipation of Indian women, their services cannot be suppressed.  

CRUELTIES AND CHARITIES

The society had many barbarian elements and at the same time it was not devoid of human sympathy. Neither the Nawabs of Arcot nor the British administrators gave habitual consideration to the rights and privileges of the individuals. Ignorance, low-cunning and falsehood marked the character of large sections of the masses. At times the people cherished a vindictive spirit. For the ordinary purpose of caste discipline fines were imposed. Sometimes for serious offences like theft, flogging by tamarind twigs was given. A wife suspected of misconduct was made to stand during her trial in a bending posture, onions and radishes were suspended from her ears and two gridstones were hung by a rope round her neck.  


was the usual punishment by which the offender and the members of his family were prohibited from taking meals with any of his fellow castemen or from receiving fire or water at their hands or even speaking to them or entering their houses; depriving of the services of the barber and washerman and forbidding to enter the houses of all members of the caste even on the occasion of marriage or death.\textsuperscript{154} In order to remove all the ban, the Guru was called to perform \textbf{Punyaham} (purificatory rite) and branded the offender on the tongue with a needle of gold. Among the high castes, the most familiar form of expiation was ingesting \textbf{Panchakavya}, the five products of the cow, a mixture of \textit{milk, curd, ghee, cow-dung} and \textit{cow’s urine}. 

People felt that it was part of their religious obligation to institute charities. But these charitable institutions were not endowed by Princes and Zamindars. The rich inhabitants, the corporate bodies of weavers,\textsuperscript{155} artisans and merchants raised contributions for the support of the charitable establishments which they inherited from the past.

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FOOD

The nature of food the people of Tamil Nadu used to consume assessed the prosperity or the adversity of a society in which they lived. Absentious by socio-religious necessity in general they were moderate in their diet. The majority, though non-vegetarians took meat occasionally because they could not afford it quite often. They used to have a feast rarely with a platter of rice and a little meat. High-caste Hindus like the Brahmins and the Vellalas were strict vegetarians to whom meat-eating and consumption of alcohol were unpardonable crimes. The lower castes were indulgent as necessities and circumstances warranted. Since they did not form a regular part of the Hindu fold, they practically had neither restrictions nor restraints – social or moral to refine them. Without checks and balances for centuries together, they were accustomed to vices which almost had degraded them to sub-human level.

The lower castes who were near the sea-shores consumed fish indiscriminately because they were cheap and available in


abundance.\textsuperscript{158} Rice was rarely consumed by the poor as they could not afford it. It was the staple food of the rich and the higher castes to whom rice alone was permissible especially during ceremonial occasions. All kinds of coarse grain like \textbf{Cambu} – Pearl Millet (\textit{Pennisetum Americanum}) \textbf{Raki} (\textit{Eleusine coracana}) and \textbf{Cholam} (\textit{Sorghum bicolor}) could not be used on such occasions as they were taboos. To sanctify such occasions they scrupulously avoided such unclean food which was solely meant for the poor who needed no scruples in their food habits due to poverty and necessity.\textsuperscript{159}

Food habits of the Brahmins and others were quite fascinating. The Brahmins were lovers of good and sumptuous food which they relished to their heart’s content. They were extremely scrupulous in their food and would not partake of any dish prepared by members of another caste nor drink water in their houses.\textsuperscript{160} It was enough for them to incur pollution if

\textsuperscript{158} S. Arunachalam, \textit{History of the Pearl Fishery of the Tamil Coast} (Annalalai Nagar : Annalalai University Publications, 1952), pp.80-94.


people of another caste saw the dishes to be partaken or the vessels used for preparing such dishes. They usually used plantain leaves and occasionally used brass vessels also which even their own sons were not allowed to use. As they were obliged to observe frequent fasts as a part of their religious duties, they were inclined to be overeating. Christian Missionaries who were not familiar with the food habit of the region, often felt fish out of water without the dishes which were preferred or favoured. The food system of the lower castes and their constant indulgence in bad habits which almost had brought about their ruin. They took even dead animals without a slight sense of ignomity which particularly was repugnant to foreigners.161

DRESS

The dress of the ordinary people were extremely coarse and simple. The rich were elegant in their appearance and almost always were costly. Except dancing girls, the women-folk normally did not wear bodice, which was meant for

the harlots whose sole motive was to attract men by adding charm to their personality.\textsuperscript{162} The women wrapped a long piece of cloth – \textbf{Sari}, four feet wide and eight feet long round their waist two or three times to form it as a sort of petticoat to cover the lower part of their body below their waist. The other end of their \textit{saris} covered their shoulders and chests. All the Brahmins, rich or poor, dressed alike but the rich usually wore fine and more expensive materials.\textsuperscript{163} The manner of wearing the dress varied from caste to caste. The women of the Nadar caste were forbidden to cover their breasts in the Southern Districts of Tamil Nadu.\textsuperscript{164} In the later part of 19\textsuperscript{th} C and during the first half of 20\textsuperscript{th} C, there took place conspicuous changes in the mode of dressing, especially among the elite who preferred western type of dress materials.

\textbf{ORNAMENTS}

Women of the Hindu folk in general were fond of ornaments made of gold and silver which they wore on their

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\textsuperscript{163} T.R. Sesha Iyengar, \textit{op.cit.}, p.199.

\textsuperscript{164} C.M. Agur, \textit{Church History of Travancore} (Madras : S.P.G. Press, 1901), pp.932-935.
\end{flushleft}
heads, ears, noses, necks, arms, fingers, waists, ankles and toes. Marriage badge or tali was common to all women though it differed in size and shape from caste to caste. Bangles made of gold or silver was popular with all women, but the poor could wear only glass bangles. Christian women like their Hindu counterparts wore fond of ornaments. Muslim women also wore fond of ornaments and bore their ears and noses to wear ornaments of various kinds suited to them. The Konku Vellala women wore various ornaments - Kasumalai, Attikai, Muthumalai, Ottiyam, Kolucu which were well-known for their thrift and industry. Men normally did not wear ornaments, but the Kallars wore gold ear-rings and a kind of gold or silver ornaments in their fore-arms called Kappu. Brahmins and a few high caste men wore a garland called Rudraksam as a mark of their devotion to Lord Siva.

TATTOOING

Tattooing was a common feature of the people of Tamil Nadu as it was with any other ancient tribes. Korava


women who practised it as a profession along with fortune
telling were greatly sought after by women, to whom tattooing
was a way to adorn their bodies. The women of the Vellalas,
Paraiyas, Pallis and Pachamalai Malayalis tattooed on one or
both of the cheeks and on their chins.\textsuperscript{167} Tattooing was
tolerated by almost every caste except the Tottiynas, Maravas
and Chettis. Kallar women who seldom used upper garments,
tattooed their bodies and upper arms in the form of a
bodice.\textsuperscript{168}

ENTERTAINMENTS

An account of the social mosaic of Tamil Nadu will
not be complete without mentioning the entertainments which
formed an essential part of their daily life. One of the
entertainments that was largely participated by people who
belong to all walks of life was wrestling. During the
wrestlings, severe blows were given in such seriousness that

\textsuperscript{167} F.R. Hemingway (ed.) \textit{Trichinopoly District Gazetteer}
(Madras : Government Press, 1907), p.84.

\textsuperscript{168} T. Venkataswami, \textit{A Manual of the Tanjore District} (Madras :
teeth would be broken and eyes would be put out, faces would be disfigured and at times they had to be carried away in a serious condition by their friends.\textsuperscript{169} Along with wrestling, cock fighting was also common. The people of Tamil Nadu wasted much of their earnings in gambling and cock-fighting and on jugglers. Another variety of game by which people amused themselves was gymnastics. Wandering jugglers and acrobates toured round the villages and gave gymnastic performances. The \textbf{Dombans} from \textbf{Arcot} gave gymnastic performances by walking the tight rope and lying on the stomach on the top of the vertical pose and twirling round in that position.\textsuperscript{170}

\textbf{Jallikkattu} (bull fighting) was another variety of game by which people amused themselves. It is a game worthy of bold and free people.\textsuperscript{171} In addition to these entertainments, many games such as \textbf{Kummi, Kolattam, Koli, Pallankuli} were

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played by children and adults. By the dawn of the 19th C, chess, card-playing, tennis, foot-ball, cricket, etc. became popular in which Europeans as well as educated Indians took delight. Hunting and horse race were also sources of amusement for Indians and Europeans alike.

SUPERSTITIONS

Many superstitious beliefs were in vogue among the people. Padfield, a Missionary during his stay in Tamil Nadu had studied the superstitious beliefs of the people in detail. According to him there were not less than 43 different things enumerated as prognosticating good and 34 evils if any one of them happened to be seen on the eve of a journey.172 For instance, to overhear a pleasant conversation, to hear musical instruments, to meet a company of dancing girls, to meet two Brahmins are considered good omens and augur well for journey. It was also considered to be a bad omen on setting out to meet anyone of the following: a woman with plaited red hair, a widow, bundle of firewood, a Paraiya,

smoking fire and so on.\textsuperscript{173} In the day-to-day life of the people of Tamil Nadu, animal sacrifices were performed on auspicious days in order to satisfy the family deities.\textsuperscript{174} These were the few superstitious beliefs of the people and they were held with surprising tenacity.

\section*{MAJOR RELIGIONS}

The society of Tamil Nadu during the period under review has to be looked at through the spectacles of religion also, for religion affected almost every aspect of life. Infact it was the warp and woof of the social fabric.\textsuperscript{175}

The first systematic effort to determine the population of Tamil Nadu was undertaken in A.D. 1851. According to the Census taken in 1851, the total population of Tamil Nadu (the erstwhile Madras Presidency) was 22,031,697.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{173} Simon Casie Chitty, \textit{The Caste, Customs, Manners and Literature of the Tamils} (New Delhi : Asian Educational Services, 1988), pp.123-124.
\end{itemize}
of whom 90 per cent of them were Hindus the remaining were Muslims, Christians and Jains.\textsuperscript{176} Thus Hinduism commanded the largest following, while a considerable section owed their allegiance to Islam and Christianity. Temples at Kanchipuram, Sri Perumbadur, Sri Mushnam, Chidambaram, Kumbakonam, Tanjore, Sri Rangam, Palani, Madurai, Thiruvannamalai, Tirunelveli, Tiruchendur, Nanguneri and Thirukurunkudi attracted thousands of devotees. Temples were erected in towns, villages, woods and river beds, on the highways and on unfrequented hills. Different temples had festivals of their own. In addition, the inhabitants erected monuments in honour of self devoted victims including women who died as virgins.\textsuperscript{177} It is usual with the Hindus to undertake pilgrimage to holy shrines outside Tamil Nadu, as far as Benares and Puri.

\section*{ISLAM}

Muslims constitute only six percent of the population of Tamil Nadu. Muslim incursions into south could be traced

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back to the days of Malik Kafur, the general of Ala-ud-din-Khilji, the Sultan of Delhi. But these early incursions had no permanent effect on the common people in the extreme south. The assumption of power by the Nawabs of Carnatic, their struggle with the Poligars of the south necessitated Muslim settlements of generals and soldiers in Tamil Nadu. This could be inferred from the fact that the distribution of Muslim population in Tamil Nadu even today dense in areas which were once theatres of war. Vellore, Ambur, Vaniyambadi, Arcot, Nagore, Muthupettai, Aiyampettai, Tanjore, Melur, Goripalayam, Virudhunagar, Thulukkapatti, Kayalpatnam, Pottalpudur and Melapalayam were and are their abodes.

As far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, the original Muslim emigrants must have been few in number and


subsequently they must have grown numerically by intermingling freely with the native population. It is indeed rare to come across a Muslim family in Tamil Nadu of purely alien pedigree or descent. Their customs and practices betray predominant influence of the local Hindu tradition. Muslim inroads into Tamil Nadu were the result of political needs and economic opportunities rather than a Jihad (holy war) in any sense of the term.181

CHRISTIANITY

Catholics

The history of the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu practically dates from the 16th century though there are some traces of more ancient missions. It was on the Tinnevelly coast that the Rev. Francis Xavier in A.D. 1542 began his work as an Apostle of the Indies after a short stay at Goa. Many of the Paravas, then and now a fishery caste became Christians accepting Portuguese protection against the

Muhammadans who oppressed them. 182 The Rev. Francis Xavier completed the work and since then all the Paravas had called themselves, his children. They spread all along the coasts of Tinnevelly, Madurai and Ceylon. Tuticorin was their main centre. Many of the letters of the Rev. Francis Xavier were written from Tuticorin and other places in the neighbourhood. 183 For sometimes, the missions were confined to the coast. The famous Jesuit Mission of Madura founded by the Rev. Robert De Nobili in A.D. 1607 was soon extended itself to all over Tamil Nadu. 184 Significantly the letters of the Jesuits from 1609 to 1780 are the only source material for the reconstruction of the history of Tamil Nadu.

Rev. John De Britto, a Catholic Missionary who suffered martyrdom in Ramnad 185 in A.D. 1693 laboured at times in

Tinnevelly and Joseph Beschi (a great Tamil scholar popularly known as “Viramamunivar”) lived sometimes at Kayattar in the Tinnevelly District.\textsuperscript{186} Christianity prospered in various parts of Tamil Nadu inspite of all difficulties but its progress was arrested by some European diplomatic developments. In 1759, Portugal suppressed the Society of Jesus in its dominions and imprisoned all its members. Under various pretexts the Jesuits of the Eastern Missions were brought within the reach of Portuguese officials. Many of them were imprisoned too. Till 1837, all the districts of Tamil Nadu were entrusted to French Jesuits and since that time the Mission had made steady progress. As a result of the creation of the Vicariate Apostle of Madura in 1846, the recruits of the Catholics rose considerably by the year 1851.\textsuperscript{187}

Roman Catholic Churches were founded in all parts of Tamil Nadu, and majority of them were managed by the Jesuits. The Diocese of Trichinopoly was divided into three districts of Trichinopoly, Madura and Palayamcottah each

\textsuperscript{186} K. Rajayyan, \textit{op.cit.}, p.325-327.

comprising a varying number of Pangus (Parishes). One of the four Vicariates of the Mylapore Diocese was the Southern Province generally known as the “Fishery Coast”,¹⁸⁸ which was administered by a “Vicar-Vara” stationed at Tuticorin. The Paravas, the most neglected folk among the Hindus accepted Christianity in large numbers and emerged as a dominant group in the church.¹⁸⁹ The converts were provided with posts in the Customs Department, exempted from impressment in the Navy and supported by the distribution of rice.

PROTESTANT MISSIONS

The history of the Protestant Missionary efforts in Tamil Nadu dates back to the era of the Poligar wars. In 1706 the Danish Lutherans founded Protestant Missions in the Carnatic. The Danish Missions thus commenced at Tranquebar branched out all over South India.¹⁹⁰ Cuddalore, Madras,


Tanjore, Trichinopoly, Nagapatnam and Tinnevelly each in turn received the light of Gospel from the fire that was first lighted in the heart of Frederick IV the King of Denmark. The Dutch also took possession of Tuticorin and began to popularise the Gospel there. As early as A.D. 1771, the memorable Rev. Schwartz mentions in his diary that one of his Trichinopoly converts had in that year engaged in preaching to the people of Tinnevelly.

The Rev. Schwartz, a German by birth, was the greatest among the Protestant Missionaries who founded the Tanjore Mission in A.D. 1778. Sister Clorinda, a converted Hindu widow, was Schwartz’s ‘Chosen Angel’ sent to the southern part of Tamil Nadu. Her original name was Kokila who built the first English church at Palayamcottah. When


she built the church, it was meant to be a Tamil church only. Occasionally the **Rev. Schwartz** was using it for the English service, marriages and Baptism of babies of the military officials. The construction of the church was over in A.D. 1783 and consecrated on 24th August 1785. Four years later, he ordained one **Sathyanathan**, one of his native catechists, who was placed in charge of the congregation.\(^\text{195}\)

**SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE (SPCK)**

A beginning was made among the Shanars (Nadars) of the south by the **Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.)**, the first convert from this class being a man of **Kalankudiyiruppu**, some ten miles east of **Sathankulam** in the Tinnevelly District. Receiving the name **David**, he was put to work in his native area.\(^\text{196}\) The **Rev. Jacnicke**, **Rev. Gericke**, **Rev. James Hough** and **Rev. Bishop Heber** had

\(^{195}\) S. Paul, Caste in the Tinnevelly Church "The Harvest Field", September 1893, pp.82-83.

\(^{196}\) C.B. Firth, **An Introduction to Indian Church History** (Madras : C.L.S Publications, 1976), p.135-139.
infused new life into the Mission.\textsuperscript{197} Though it was not a part of their duty, they brought about a complete revival by starting schools, distributed Bible and prayer books. Inspite of all their untiring attempts, when their efforts failed, they appealed to the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) for help.

\section*{CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY (C.M.S.)}

In A.D. 1820, the C.M.S. sent down the Rev. C.E.Rhenius, perhaps the most notable missionary who founded a number of societies, the important of which was the Dharma Sangam (Philanthropic Society) by which lands and houses were purchased for the converts. Some of the sites were donated by people belonged to the Mission, others were purchased directly with Mission funds. The merchant Sawyer who had befriended the young catechist David, died in 1816 leaving the lands to the Mission which became the village of Sawyerpuram.\textsuperscript{198}

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In 1824, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) transferred the charge of their mission to the Society for the Propagation of Gospel (S.P.G.). Meanwhile the organisation started by the Rev. James Hough and then expanded by the Rev. Rhenius also existed. In A.D. 1835, the Rev. Rhenius developed doctrinal differences with the Church Missionary Society authorities and quitted the Mission.

**SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF GOSPEL (S.P.G.)**

In 1836, the S.P.G. started its evangelical works and from that year onwards a regular succession of English workers both for S.P.G. and C.M.S. had followed. In 1841, a young Scottish Missionary the Rev. Caldwell was sent to Tinnevelly, in south Tamil Nadu by the S.P.G. At the time of Caldwell’s arrival in Tinnevelly, a Mass Movement began among the Nadars as they were converted to Christianity, not as an individual or families but as entire villages. After the mass movement, the S.P.G. Mission in Tinnevelly District doubled its
numbers from 22,000 to 44,000 almost all of whom were
drawn from the Nadar community.

In 1877, the Rev. Caldwell was consecrated as the
First Bishop of Tinnevelly and until his death, he lived and
worked among the Nadars with enormous influence of the
community’s history. He established his Mission at
Idaiyangudi, south of Sathankulam. Idaiyangudi means
‘Shepherds Abode’, though it was almost Nadars in
population. In speaking of the Nadars, Caldwell observed that
with a few honourable exceptions they had made little progress
towards Christianity. During the Mass Movement, some of

199. M.A. Sherring, The History of Protestant Missions in India
from their Commencement in 1706 to 1881 (London : The

200. D.A. Washbrook, The Emergence of Provincial Politics : The
Madras Presidency 1870-1920 (New Delhi : Vikas Publishing

201. J.L. Wyatt (ed.), Reminiscences of Bishop Caldwell (Madras :
Addisson and Co., 1894), pp.77-80.


203. R. Caldwell, Report on the Mission of Edeyenkoody (London :
the Nadars gave their support to the Vibuthi Sangam\textsuperscript{204} (the sacred ash society) which was founded in Tiruchendur at that time to put an end to the wholesale conversion. Each person received into the Sangam composed predominantly of Brahmins and Vellalas, took an oath of allegiance to the Hindu Gods and to oppose the spread of Christianity.\textsuperscript{205} By 1844, a short lived native reaction to Christianity arose, as a sooth-sayer Alagappa Nadar, proclaimed himself as champion of heathenism. However, this opposition soon died out.\textsuperscript{206} Writing in 1869, Caldwell observed that Christianity promoted the education and enlightenment of Nadar converts, which enabled several of them to take up work in the coffee estates in Ceylon. The Nadars successfully responded to the opportunities for profitable labour and brought new money to their native villages.\textsuperscript{207}

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The evangelistic and educational activities of the Christian Missionaries particularly Roman Catholics and Protestants in Tamil Nadu had made great and lasting impact on the native population. The arousing of public consciousness was a positive contribution of the Christian Missionaries a fact which cannot be lost sight of.

To summarise, the social scenario in Tamil Nadu was rather a complex one. As there were a number of castes and communities, communal harmony was a thing to be desired. Society was dominated by Brahmins and caste-Hindus who enjoyed privileges and prestige. The so called non-caste Hindus were always treated as slaves. There was a definite gulf between the high and low. A number of basic rights like the right of temple-entry were far away from their reach. Exploitation by the elite groups became the order of the day. The advent of the Christian Missionaries in Tamil Nadu served as an eye opener to the non-caste Hindus. Thanks to the efforts of the Christian Missionaries, communities like Nadars, Paravas, Pallas and Paraiyas began to breath fresh air. Christianity promoted their education and enlightenment. Their position has been greatly improved and many spheres of useful
remunerative and honourable labour, which were formerly closed against them, were now almost opened to them. Though a number of reforms introduced by the British Colonial Government with a definite view to effect structural changes in the society, their expectations failed to achieve their ends. In an over-all assessment, elements of change and continuity could clearly be seen in the Tamil society. Under the impact of the West and that of the British administration, native society was forced to make adjustments in certain areas, while traditional life continued to flow unaffected particularly in the rural areas. This was true in the case of religion and caste.

Though the new concepts like liberty, equality and fraternity which were alien to the native social setup, that stirred the still waters of Tamil society and brought about changes which were new and unprecedented. Thus the socially awakened people of Tamilnadu began to cry for their legitimate rights and actively participated in the Gadhian Social Movements in Tamil Nadu.