CHAPTER - I
SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE VANNIYAS

Vanniyas also known as Pallis provide a typical example of a transitional society striving for modernisation. Actually, it is a cultivating caste found mostly in Madras, Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Cuddalore, Villupuram, Salem, Namakkal, Trichy and Dharmapuri Districts of Tamil Nadu, constituting about one fourth of the total population. They refused to accept their status as humble agricultural caste. They wanted to get an order from the Government that they were not a lower caste. When the 1871 census enumeration work was likely to start, they submitted a petition to the Government and wanted that they should be classified as Kshatriyas. Generally, they argue that they are Kshatriyas or higher caste Hindus by citing the evidences from the puranas.

The word ‘Agnikula’ directly corresponding to Vanniya Kula signifies only Kshatriyas. ¹ It is something like a name named after a cause, which gradually lost its etymological significance and becomes a common name. For example, a Shastri is so named on account of his

attainments or mastery in the sastras. But today, we find a Brahmin without any mastery in Sastras or education is now so called a Shastri. Hence, it has a common significance. Similarly the word Vanniya which meant originally a descendant of Agnikula Kshatriya was subsequently came to be known to any Kshatriya according to usage and context.

Edgar Thurston has probed into the origin of Vanniyas in his monumental work 'Caste and Tribes of Southern India'. He quoted a book written by a native Indian to show that the Pallis (Pullies - Vanniyar) of South India, are descendants of the fire races (Agnikulas) of the Kshatriyas and that the Tamil Pullies were at one time the shepherd kings of Egypt. It is to be noted here that at the time of 1871 Census, the representatives of this community submitted a petition to the Government requesting that they may be classified as Kshatriyas. During 1891 Census, a book entitled "Vanniya Kula Vilakkam: A treatise on the Vanniya Caste" was compiled by T.Aiyyakannu Naicker in support of

the caste claim to be returned as Kshatriyas. In 1907, another book entitled Varuna Darpanam (Mirror of caste) was published, in which an attempt was made to identify the caste with the Pallavas.

Kulasekhara, one of the early Travancore kings, and one of the most renowned Alwars reverenced by the Sri Vaishnava community in Southern India is claimed by the Pallis as a king of their caste. Even now, at the Parthasarathi temple in Triplicane (in the city of Madras), which according to inscriptions is a Pallava temple, Pallis celebrate his anniversary with great acclamation and enthusiasm. The Pallis of Komatesvaranpettah in the city of Madras have a Kulasekhara Perumal Sabha, which manages the celebration of the anniversary. The temple has recently been converted at considerable cost into a temple for the great Alwar. A similar celebration is held at the Chintadrippettai Adikesava Perumal temple in Madras. The Pallis have the right to

3. T. Aiyakkannu Nayakar, op.cit. p. XVI.
4. Ibid. p.IX.
6. Ibid.
present the most important camphor offering of the Mylapore Siva Temple. They alleged that the temple was originally, theirs, but in course of time, they lost their hold over it.\(^7\)

F.R. Hemingway relates a traditional story of the Pallis regarding their origin. "They are descendants of one Vira Vanniyan, who was created by a sage named Sambuha, when he was destroying the two demons named Vatapi and Enatapi. This Vira Vanniyan married a daughter of the god Indra, and had five sons, named Rudra, Brahma, Krishna, Sambuha and Kai, whose descendants now live respectively in the country north of the Palar in the Cauvery delta, between the Palar and Pennar. They have written a Puranam and a drama bearing on this tale. They declare that they are superior to Brahmans. It is because that the Brahmans must be invested with the sacred thread after birth, they bring their sacred thread with them at their birth itself".\(^8\)

"The Vanniyans", Nelson states, "are at the present time a small and obscure agricultural caste, but there is reason to believe that they are


8. Ibid.
descendants ancestors who, held a good position among the tribes of South India.” A manuscript, abstracted at page 90 of the Catalogue states that the Vanniys belong to the Agnikula, and are descended from the Muni Sambhu; and that they gained victories by means of their skill in archery. And another manuscript, abstracted at page 427, shows that two of their chiefs enjoyed considerable power, and refused to pay the customary tribute to the Rayar, who was for a long time unable to reduce them to submission.9

The terms Vanni and Vannivan are used in Tamil poems to denote king. Thus, in the classical Tamil poem kalladam, which has been attributed to the time of Tiruvalluvar, the author of the sacred Kural, Vanni is used in the sense of king. Kamban, the author of the Tamil Ramayana, uses it in a similar sense.10

In an inscription dated 1189 A.D., published by Dr. E. Hultzsch, Vanniya Nayan appears among the titles of the locals chief of Tiruchchuram, who made a grant of land to the Vishnu temple at


Tiruchchuram is identical with Tiruvidaichram about four miles southeast of Kanchipuram, where there is a ruined fort, and also a Siva Temple celebrated in the hymns of Tirugnana Sambandhar, the great Saiva saint who lived in the ninth century. Local tradition, confirmed by one of the Mackenzie manuscripts, says that this place was, during the time of the Vijayanagar King Krishna Deva Raya (1509 - 30 A.D.) ruled over by two feudal chiefs of the Vanniya caste named Kandavarayan and Sendavarayan. It is reported that they neglected to pay tribute to their sovereign lord, who sent an army to exact it. The brothers proved invincible, but one of their dancing-girls was guilty of treachery. Acting under instructions, she poisoned Kandavarayan. His brother Sendavarayan caught hold of her and her children, and drowned them in the local tank. The tank and the hillock close by still go by the name of Kupi, the dancing-girl.

12. Ibid.
An inscription of the Vijayanagar king DevaRaya II (1419 - 44 A.D.) gives him the title of the lord who took the heads of the eighteen Vanniyas. This inscription, dated 1456 A.D., states that, when one Raja Vallabha ruled at Conjeevaram, a general named Vanniya Chinna Pillai, obtained a piece of land at Saatankad near Madras. Reference is made by Orme to the assistance which the Vanniya of Sevagherry gave Muhammed Yusuf in his reduction of Tinnevelly in 1757. The Vanniya here referred to is the zamindar of Sivagiri in the Tinnevelly district, a Vanniya by caste. Vanniyas are also mentioned in Ceylon archives.14

H.A. Stuart is of the opinion that the name Vanniyan seems to have been introduced by the Brahmans, possibly to gratify the desire of the Pallis for genealogical distinction. Padayachi means a soldier, and is also of late origin. That the Pallis were once an influential and in their present desire to be classified as Kshatriyas, they are merely giving expression to this belief, but, unless an entirely new meaning is to be given to the term Kshatriya, their claim must be dismissed absurd. After the fall of the Pallava dynasty, the Pallis became agricultural servants under the Vellalas, and it is only since the advent of British rule that they have

begun to assert their claims to a higher position.\textsuperscript{15}

Further, W. Francis writes that "this caste has been referred to as being one of those which are claiming for themselves a position higher than that which Hindu society is inclined to accord them. Their ancestors were socially superior to themselves, but they do not content themselves with stating this, but in places are taking to wearing the sacred thread of the twice-born, and claim to be kshatriyas. They have published pamphlets to prove their descent from that caste, and they returned themselves in thousands, especially in Godavari, as Agnikula Kshatriyas or Vanniyakula Kshatriyas, meaning Kshatriyas of the fire race".\textsuperscript{16}

T. Aiyakannu Naicker, has made a sincere attempt in his work "Vanniya Kula Vilakkam" to justify that Vanniyakula Kshatriya are directly related to Agnikula. To substantiate this argument he has quoted from Villiputhurar Bharata, Daiparvum Kandavathagana Sarga, Stanza 75, poem 3 which says.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15.} Dr. Ramadoss, Kanal, dated: 16th December, 1988.

\textsuperscript{16.} W. Francis, Gazetter of South Arcot District cited by Thurston, \textit{Caste and Tribes}, \textit{op.cit.}, p.12.

\textsuperscript{17.} T. Aiyakannu Naicker, Vanniya Kula Vilakkam, \textit{op.cit.}, p.31.
It means that after partaking of it with pleasure, Vanni had his belly and body cooled. Again he quotes from Kambar's Semporsilayaloopathu, stanza 3.18

It means that “Is there any bow with the exception of the best of the bows of the Vanniyar?”.

In ramayanam, Voorthara Kandum, Thiruvolakka padalam’ stanza 11, it is mentioned Ayodhya was filled with terraced houses, over which were many banners standing at the guarded gate looking for a favourable opportunity, entered many Vanniyas, Sovereigns and crowned kings.19

In Karunakara Vannniya Thonda Vannniyanar Sathagan Stanza 24 and silaiezhupathu stanza 68, it is referred as Karunakara Thonda Vanniyanea implying that the Pallava king as Vanniya.20

19. T. Aiyakannu Naicker, Vanniyakula Vilakkam, op.cit., p.34.
20. Ibid. p.32.
Walter Hamilton, Esq., mentioned about the position of Vanniyas in his work "The Geographical, Statistical and Historical description of Hindustan and the adjacent countries" as follows:

Wanny - A district in the interior of Ceylon, situated towards Trincomalee, in the North-East quarter. This is a fine flat country and well adopted for the cultivation of rice which from remaining vestiges, would appear to have been formerly raised in large quantities. The ruins of 600 tanks some of great extent, are still to be seen and the territory seems to have been in a state of great prosperity to its occupation by the Dutch, since which event it has declined. At different periods its vannies or princes taking advantage of the wars between the Candyan sovereigns and their European enemies endeavoured to establish an authority independent of 60th but they finally after their country had been much desolated by all parties submitted to the Dutch. The road through Wanny, from Vertativo to Molletivo presents the shortest route between Colombo and Trincomalee, so that its inhabitants sustained much pillage and vexation from troops and their followers marching between these stations but these atrocities were entirely suppressed during the administration of the Earl of Guildford, and the district has ever since
between in a state of progressive improvement”.  

Robert Orme, Esq., while discussing the war in Coromandel in his famous book “A history of the Military transactions of the British Nation in Indostan from the year 1745,” volume II, chapter VIII page 200 refers in to the war with poligars and incursions of the British in March 1757 into the Tirunelveli District and says:-

In this while Mohamad Yusuf the commandant and Mudhili the renter of these countries not being certified which way Calliand would direct his march, expected that he would come in somewhere near Madura and remain at Srivilliputtur under the hills to the west until they received intelligence that the enemies were marching from Paniyalamkurichi towards Tirunelveli on which they moved to intercept their return and besides other poligars of less note were accompanied by Vanniyar of Siva-giri a very large Fort situated at the foot of the hills about 20 miles South of Srivilliputtur. 


The Vanniyas have many sub-divisions such as Agni, Kavadan, Kudaikatti, Padaiyachi, Palli and Rudra. Palli is the name usually applied to those of the caste who in the later days were relegated to backwardness.

The term Palli is derived from ‘Panda-Mutti’ or touching the Pandal, a practice that had been maintained in ancient times in reference to the pile of marriage pots reaching to the top of Pandal. The Pallis in the other districts are called by various names(titles) such as Nayakar, Varma, Padaiyachi, Kandar, Chera, Chola, Nayanan, Udaiyar and Sambuvaraya. Some Pallis adopted even such titles as Gupta, Rayar, Pillai, Reddi, Goundan, Kavandan and Chembian.

In the Salem district some Pallis are divided into Anju-nal (five days) and Pannendu-nal (twelve days) depending upon their performance of the final death ceremonies on the fifth or twelfth day after death, to distinguish them from those who perform them on the sixteenth day. Another division of Pallis in the Salem district is based on the


24. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op.cit.,p.31.
kind of ear ornament which is worn. The Olai Pallis wear a circular ornament (olai), and the Nagavadam Pallis wear an ornament in shape like a cobra and called Nagavadam.25

The Pallies are Saivities or Vaishnavities, but are also demonolaters, and worship Mutthalamma, Mariamma, Ayanar, Muneswara, Ankalamma, and other minor deities. Writing nearly a century ago concerning the Vana Pallies settled at Kolar in Mysore, Buchanan states that "they are much addicted to the worship of the saktis, or destructive powers, and endeavour to advert their wrath by bloody sacrifices. These are performed by cutting off the animal's head before the door of the temple, and invoking the deity to partake of the sacrifice. There is no altar, nor is the blood sprinkled on the image, and the body serves the votaries for a feast. The Pallivanlu have temples dedicated to a female spirit of this kind named Mutialamma, and served by pujaris (priests) of their own caste. They also offer sacrifices to Mariamma, whose pujaris are Kurubaru".26

25. Edgar Thurston, Castes and Tribes of Southern India, op.cit.,p.31.
It is also argued that the Vanniyas have close connection with Sri Lanka even from its pre-historic age down to modern times. The Pre-Aryan inhabitants of Sri Lanka can be broadly classified under three divisions, namely (1) Vaddas, (2) Nagas and (3) Yakhas. There were three classes of Vadas; now one of them the Vanniyas alone continue speaking Tamil. They dress like Tamil Villagers of South India and in respect of physical features and traditional occupation, they are akin to the Malavedans, Irulas and Sholages the jungle tribes of South India. The name Vedda, which has affinity with the Tamil word Vedar meaning hunters, seems to confirm the location of new original home in the Tamil land. They also worship Kandaswamy, Aiyanar, Pillaiyar, Rudra and Parvati. Thus we may conclude that the Vanniyas were an aboriginal people related to the ancient tribe of South India; i.e. the Vanniyas.27

The Velaikkar system was introduced into Sri Lanka probably during the time of Vijayabahu-I. This institution of body guards who constituted an element of the royal fighting forces was an outcome of the Chola contact with the Sri Lanka. The Velaikkaras constituted a body of

27. L. K. Sivanesan, The Sambuvaravar of the Tondaimandalam

foreign mercenaries, and during the Chola period, they were mainly Tamils. Even after the termination of the Chola rule, it was continued. They were mostly Hindus. The institution of Velaikkara was continued by the kings in Sri Lanka for nearly a century after the reign of Vijayabahu-I and perhaps the later Sinhalese kings absorbed them in the regular standing army, most of the velaikkaras were probably Tamil speaking Vanniyas.\footnote{28}

During the time of Rajasena, large band of Tamil Vanniyas went and settled in the district of Nuwarakalawiva. They are indicated as Wanni. Because of the above mentioned historical connection of the Vanniyas with Sri Lanka, Vanniyas are mentioned in Ceylon archives. Infact, Wanni (Tamil Vanni corrupted to Wanni) is the name of a district in Ceylon, situated towards Trincomalee, in the Northeast quarter. Armies of Vanniyas are often mentioned in the Ceylon Annals. It is stated that in the year of 3300 of the Kaliyuga, a Pandya Princess went over to Ceylon and married its king and was accompanied by a sixty bands of Vanniyas.\footnote{29}


\footnote{29. *Ibid.*, p.20.}
Further Sir. J.E. Tennent in his book indicates that in modern times, the Wanny wads governed by native princes styled Wannyas and occasionally by females with the title of Wunniches.

It is also established by Prof. L.K. Sivanesan that the Sambuvarayas were the Vanniyas or Pallis. They were the ancient people of the Tondaimandalam; that they claimed their origin from the sage Sambu and associated themselves with “fire race”; that they slowly worked their way up and became very prominent as the ruling feudal chiefs in the Tondaimandalam region.30

Vanniya Kula Kshatriya, no doubt is the single largest community in Tamil Nadu and spread over the entire State except in Nilgiris and Kanniyakumari District. They are predominant in the districts of Madras, Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Cuddalore, Villupuram, Namakkal, Dharamapuri, Salem, Trichy and Tanjore districts. The population claimed by the community through the various representations ranged from 1.60 to 1.65 crores. According to the Socio-Education cum Economic survey conducted by the Second Backward class Commission, the population is 65,04,855. In the list of

Backward classes prepared by the commission under the main entry Vanniya Kula Kshatriya, the prominent subjects namely Vanniyan, Vanniyar, Vanniya Gounder, Gounder, Padayachi, Palli and Agnikula Kshatriya have also been included. The community found a place in the list of Backward classes from the very beginning. By occupation, they are primarily agriculturists. Majority of them are either tenant farmers or agricultural coolies. But due to the various difficulties and changes in the Socio Economic Pattern in their traditional profession, there is a lot of discontent in their minds. 31

It is to be observed here that the people of this community also engaged in other occupations like wood cutting, lime burning, sheep breeding, poultry, building construction work, well digging, earth work, stone cutting, road formation, Beedi manufacturing, Weaving, Dyeing, Cart driving, Tailoring and Match industry. They are also said to be engaged in Toddy tapping, Tannery, Butchery and Scavanging.32


32. **Ibid.**
This is perhaps the only major caste which has no effective sub-castes or subdivisions. The terms 'Vannia Kula Kshatriyas' are known throughout the district and innumerable titles are used by these people. In a representation made on behalf the Toilers party, 79 such titles had been enumerated. Most of them have a martial meaning to indicate that the caste is descended from a race of fighters, just like the Maravas and Kallas in the South. The title commonly used and accepted in Thiruvallur, Kanchipuram, Cuddalore, Villupuram, and Tanjore is Padayachi. In Vellore, Tiruvannamalai and the city of Madras, Naicker or Nayakars is more popular. In Salem and Dharmapuri, Gounder is the common title. Nevertheless, Padayachi and Naicker are accepted as the more popular titles. There are Reddiars and Moopanars as well. In Salem, Dharmapuri and Coimbatore, the community is known as the Vannia Gounder or Padayachi Gounder to distinguish it from the Vellala Gounder who are the dominant cultivating caste in that area.33

The caste has all the traits of a self contained tribe. This is inevitable in view of its enormous size and its earlier fighting origin. There were Raja Vanniyars, Kshatriya Vanniyas, Vaishanvites, Barbers and Dhobies and other service castes inside the community for the exclusive service of the community, though these distinctions are levelled down in recent decades.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS OF THE VANNIYAS

Simple and austere in their social outlook, Vanniyas generally adopt joint family system. Initiation of a separate family is considered only when the family expand beyond unmanageable proportions. This event is called Thani Kudithanam Puguthal. A portion of the house is set apart for their use. Small houses are common for Vanniyas.

RELIGION AND FESTIVALS OF THE VANNIYAS

The Vanniyas worship their ancestors and offer many sacrifices to them. They also worship Siva, Vinayaga and Muruga. But proper family Gods are various Sakthis or female destructive spirits such as Kali, Bhadrakali. They also worship Mariyamman, one of the goddesses who is very popular. Many of the festivals are associated with religion,while others are purely social, connected with events like the harvest of crops. The Vanniya community celebrate Mariyamman festival in the month of Chittirai. During the festival day, each household is expected to bring a
tray of rice flour lamps carried by its women. Lamps are made by mixing rice flour with jaggery and water and forming small balls of this substances, each with a depression in the middle. In the depression is poured little ghee and the whole is lighted by inserting a small wick. This is called Mavilakku. These are presented to the goddesses as an offering during the festival day.34

Another festival celebrated by them is Kartigai festival. On the day of festival houses and temples are profusely lighted with rows of lamps. Another festival celebrated by the Vanniyas is Thai Pongal which is essentially a harvest festival. Even today most of these festivals are popular among the Vanniya Community.35

CEREMONIES THAT TAKE PLACE WHEN A GIRL COMES OF AGE

When a girl attains puberty, she is considered impure and is kept in a separate corner of the house for ten days. The news is announced to her maternal grand parents. The maternal uncles wife, grand mother and


other relatives bring fruits, flowers, rice, jaggery and coconut as gifts with them. Then the girl is asked to apply oil. After the bath, the girl is seated in a place. Lamps are lighted in front of her. Nine married women perform the nalangu ceremony. Then she is offered the mixture of milk and jaggery brought from her grand mother's house. Now the girl offers betel leaves and arecanuts to the ladies who do the nalangu for her.36

The girls family invite the maternal uncle and honour him with new clothes and request him to construct a shed for the girl. Sweets are brought from the grandmother's house. Sisters of the girl's father are provided with good feasts. On the same day, they invite an astrologer to fix an auspicious day for her ablutions or purification ceremony. It is usually on the ninth day. A pounding rod is placed in the cottage to ward off pollution. The girl is not allowed to walk bare-footed. There is also a custom to see that the influence of the evil planets is guarded against, particularly during the night time. With this view in mind, iron bars, slippers and neem leaves are placed in the cottage. Slippers or footwears

are supposed to ward off evil spirits while neem leaves are associated with divine powers and are valued as protection from all sorts of evil spirits. All these days the girl is provided with food in the shed itself. Feasts are given to her by all her close relatives. During these days, the girl is decked with new clothes, jewels and flowers. Now-a-days, those who want to celebrate “Manjal Neerattu Vizha” (Ablution in turmeric water) in a grand manner even print invitation cards and invite people other than relatives. On the day of Manjal Neerattu Vizha, the house is cleaned and the girl after the bath is dressed in a new sari and is seated in the Pandal. On the day of the ablution sweets and new sari are taken from the maternal grand mother’s house. Jewels are also taken. Thereafter, the girl is allowed into the house.  

CEREMONIES CONDUCTED BEFORE THE BIRTH OF CHILD

When a woman is pregnant, it is customary to bring her to her parent’s house in the seventh month of pregnancy. It is also a custom among these people to prepare sweets and savouries and take varieties of rice and fruits. Vanniyas provide Peria Paniyaram a variety of sweet,

which is a special sweet rice cake fried in oil when they visit the husband’s house. If there are other pregnant ladies in the house three or five of them are made to sit along with the lady and arathi is taken after performing Nalangu. Then the parents of the woman take her to their house. During the stay, the lady is invited to grand dinners by the relatives. The same thing is repeated in her husband’s house when she returns.38

Usually the delivery by the woman takes place in the house of her in-laws. But now a days it takes place in her parents house also. If the delivery takes place in the husband’s house, the members of the lady’s family are invited after the birth of the child. The members of the mother’s family come with things that are necessary for the child, sometimes jewels also. If the delivery takes place in the house of the lady’s parents itself, they invite the members of the husband’s family, but they do not bring the articles mentioned above. On an auspicious day, the horoscope of the new born is cast.39

38. Interview with T.M. Ramasamy, Secretary of Vanniya Peravai, Madras, dated 15-08-1994.
A purifying ceremony is arranged on the ninth day for the mother and the baby by a priest. The child is given a name on that day. During the naming ceremony rice is spread on the ground and with a turmeric the name to be given is written on it. Usually the name is selected on the basis of the horoscope. A common custom is to name after the family deity or ancestor's grand fathers or grand mothers. Gifts are given by close relatives.

**POSITION OF WOMEN**

The level of culture of a particular society can very well be judged by the position of women in that society. The Hindu society is one of the most ancient societies in the world. During the course of its long history, it has developed numerous institutions, practices, beliefs and superstitions which marked the degradation in the position of women. The Vanniya women were not exception to this. According to Hinduism, a special responsibility rests on the parents to find a suitable match for their daughters and give them in marriage at the appropriate age. In the Vanniya community in matters relating to marriage, the

40. Interview with A. Sarathammal, Propaganda Secretary of women wing, Vanniya Peravai, dated 10th November, 1994.
parent's decision is final. The unmarried woman is never respected and she would become centre of gossip. If they wait too long, their responsibility and reputation are considered to be in danger.

So the parents are expected to arrange the marriages of their daughters as early as possible. A girl who is married by virtue of her relationship is called "Maman Magal". (Maman is mother's brother, Magal means daughter-Moksha Salvation). In the Hindu social set up, a man considers his son as more important than his wife, because he needs a son to perform certain important religious rites without which he cannot attain moksha. So the birth of a son is a spiritual necessity. However, the birth of the children whether son or daughter is longed for, and women make offering to Gods for endowing them with children. The wife usually goes to her mother's house in the seventh month of her first pregnancy. The new born infant is given a washing and casteroil. On the ninth day the child is christened.41

41. Interview with A. Gurusamy, President of Vanniyar Madam, Tiruvannamalai, dated 11th November, 1994.
In the third year the child’s hair is shaven at Mariyamman temple or at the temple of the family god. Its ears are bored and “Mozhi” (gift money) is collected. Those who have no children are called “maladi”. A maladi is considered as an accursed woman and is looked down upon by almost all. There is a story about a cow which refused to eat the grass offered by a barren woman.\textsuperscript{42}

This indicates clearly that women without children are discriminated by everybody. The lullabies sung by Vannia woman clearly indicate how children are brought up by their mothers with affection and care and the costly toys and playthings are presented to the child by maternal uncle and other relatives.

The child is named after the deities who are believed to be the special guardians of the family and ancestors. Mari short for Mariamman is a popular name among the Vanniyas. The eldest son is usually named after his parental grand father. It is the custom of the mothers not to utter their father-in-law’s name. So there came the necessity of giving a nick name for their sons.

\textsuperscript{42} Interview with Sarasu, Treasurer of women’s wing, Vanniyar Sangam, dated 12th November, 1994.
In the Vanniya Community, there was another ceremony for the girls who attained adulthood. Each girl was expected to undergo this ceremony before her marriage. The day of the week and the time when the girl comes of age are precisely noted. On the basis of it, the family astrologer is called upon to prepare a horoscope, so as to ascertain whether she attained the age under favourable star. The parents put an end to the pollution by a ceremony called “Kudisaiyil Erutthal”, which means to celebrate the puberty of a girl with a prescribed ceremony with her relatives. The expenses for this ceremony are met by her maternal uncle. On the occasion, the wife of her maternal uncle brings on Marakkal (A measure) rice, coconut, banana, betel leaves, jaggery, flowers, and sarees. Pooja is held in her house. Pooja prayers and offerings to the gods and goddesses are arranged. The girl is well-dressed and asked to sit on a chair. After the ritual, the girl is left in the hut which is made of coconut leaves.

During the period of pollution, every precaution is taken to guard the woman from evil or evil spirits. Even during the monthly menstruation they are not allowed to touch any vessels for fear of pollution. The vanniya women are noted for their generosity, hospitality and hard work. The wife shares with the husband the pleasure of giving charity to the poor and of entertaining guests. They breed cattle. The
main occupation of the ladies is selling vegetables, milk, and the produce of the kitchen-garden. The poor vanniya women are used to working from sunrise to sunset in the paddy fields. In order to overcome their body pain and tiredness, they sing while they are working.

The Vanniya women donated gifts to build temples and it is evident from the carvings of their names along with their husband's name in the stones and the pillars of the temples.43

Girls used to receive some gifts in the name of dowry. It consisted of movable and immovable gifts such as ornaments, cattle and vessels. A lawfully wedded wife inherits the whole property of the husband, including land, cattle, jewels and other valuables. If however, a daughter leaves her husband's house without any issue behind her father would claim the property back from the son-in-law, who is expected to contract a fresh marriage in due course. It is only with reference to immovable property that Hindu society was for a long time unwilling to leave the wife with full or exclusive ownership. As far as movable property like

43. Inscriptions found in Kali Temple, Dharmapuri. It is mentioned that a Vanniya Lady Kamatchi donated Rs. 5000 for the construction of the Temple.
jewels, costly apparel and ornaments was concerned, women’s right to
own it was recognised at a very early date. The amount of gifts varied
according to the economic status of the family. Dowry cannot be claimed
by compulsion. It is the will and wish of the bride’s parents. The dowry
prohibition act of 1961 was passed by the Indian Government. Even then,
the dowry system is not fully eradicated.

The women of the Vanniya community were not given much
education in those days. Their lack of schooling was compensated by
worldly experience, common sense, and oral literary knowledge inherited
from generation to generation. Though they have not been educated, they
were familiar with the use of literary words, phrases and comparisons
without any difficulty. In the villages primary and secondary schools
were started. So people began to send their sons and daughters to school.
In the beginning of the 20th century, girls belonging to this community
began to go to schools. Now-a-days, most of the women of this
community are given higher education. The dress worn by the Vanniya
community women varies according to their economic position. Little
girls upto the age of five wear half pant. Woman wear handloom sarees or
silk sarees of various colours and 8 yards in length. There are several
ways of wearing the saree and each of these has a beauty of its own. The
saree is passed round the waist and a knot is tied to keep it in place
and then a fold called Kosuvam was made for decorative purposes over one of the hips in front or back. Then the saree was passed tightly round the waist and the end of it was brought up over the breast, thrown across the left shoulder and tucked into the waist behind. The rich wear variety of costly dresses with small ornamental fold. The whole dress of Vanniya Community women was simple. Simplicity, however, did not characterize their tastes in the realm of ornaments. Since very early times they have been fond of wearing very brilliant and artistic ornaments of silver, gold, coral, diamond and pearl. Married women wear Thali of large size stung on to a number of cotton threads. They adorned themselves with ornaments such as ear rings, known as Kammal. They decorated their hair with Thalaivillai (Gold or Silver also worn on the hair plait). Chains around the neck were very popular women also used to wear a closely fitting necklace made of gold wires called "Attigai". Rich girls were known to have worn a heavy chain called Kasumalai (Necklace of gold coins).

The other ornament worn around the neck Vacciramalai.

44. Interview with E. Komathi Ammal, Secretary of Women's wing, Vanniyar Sangam on 16th August, 1995.
Muttumalai and Abranjita Pathakkam. A waist ornament some women used to wear was ottiyanam, or a belt, an ornament worn by women round their waist, made of gold. Women were anklets known as Kolusu made of Silver. The rings were indispensable for a woman with her husband living.

Many indigenous games like Kolattam (Kolattam a game played by a group of women characterised by song and dance to the accompaniment of beats with short stick held by each participant) and (Kummi another women’s game of song and dance sequence in which the rhythm is guided by the uniform clappings of the group) were played by the Vanniya Community women. Pallankuli was rather complicated game for two played with a board with two rows of title pits into which a certain number of tamarind seeds were dropped in succession. Dayam i.e. dice was also another game played by them. Even today many of these games are played by the women.

The widows were expected to wear white saree and no ornament. After the death of their husbands, they had to lead a faithful and pure life of meditation. They lived like saints. The women were expected to

45. Interview with Sakthi Kamalambal, President of Women’s wing, Vanniyar Sangam, on 20th August, 1995.
discard their tali (The sacred disc or dollar and in the case of the poor
turmeric secured to a cotton thread or gold chain tied by the bridegroom,
round the bride’s neck at wedding) three days after the death of their
husbands. Widows were not allowed to participate in festivals, on
auspicious occasions and rituals.46

The self immolation on the husband’s funeral pyre was commonly
prevalent among the Vanniya Community. It was believed that a devout
wife should die at the moment, her husband dies. Many Vanniya ladies
put an end to their lives along with their husbands in the olden days. The
widow ought to burn herself with her husband’s corpse. The tombs of
such women as had committed this action are considered as place of
worships in Padaveedu and their memory is venerated as that of saints.

In Padaveedu there is a temple in honour of Ammuchiyammal
who immolated herself in her husband’s funeral pyre. She belonged to
Vanniyar Kulam. Even now the people of Vanniyar Kulam worship her
as their family deity. The right of widows to remarriage was zealously
advocated by social reformers. But the movement did not make much
advance due to the deep antagonism of the people to the idea of widow

46. Interview with Sakthi Kamalambal, President of Women’s wing,
remarrying. Today legislation has changed many rules concerning women and they are enjoying equal privileges with man in many fields. Even now, illiteracy is high among Vanniya women. They are not yet completely free from the social bondage imposed on them by old customs. Remaining unmarried is considered to be a great sin. Marriage becomes an obligation to a woman and she has no voice in choosing her life partner. In the olden days, family was the centre of human life and the work of a woman at home was considered to be as important as any other type of work. But now increasing industrialisation and democratization of culture are gradually diminishing.47

**ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE VANNIYA'S**

As regards the economic status of Vanniyas, we find that agriculture was the mainstay of the Vanniya Community. The landlords among the Vanniya community were called “Mirasutharar”. Among the Vanniya community, all were not land lords. There were many agricultural labourers among them. Those agricultural labourers fall into two categories, hired labourers and farm servants. Hired Labourers were hired on the basis of a wage in kind or in money. Farm servants on the

other hand were permanent servants receiving remuneration on a monthly or annual basis.48

The ryots were in good position for most of the 20th century. Sometimes severe famines prevailed in Tamil country. The adversity was due to many causes. Some times the monsoon also failed. The fact was that the ryots rather found it difficult to make both ends meet. The ryots in Vellore and Chinglepet suffered in a lot. In Vellore the situation was so pathetic that the Collector says that the people were eating millets and fruits. In many places, the plough had not been applied to the land at all. Some villages were deserted due to scarcity of drinking water. In many places the water had to be extracted from the deepest wells. A great many new wells continue to be dug in dry lands and some of the old deserted and exhausted wells are being opened and fences restored and garden crops are again appearing on fields, which were lying for long waste. Due to famine, the British Government reduced the land assessment in order to improve their condition. In Vellore District, the reduction of assessment gave a great impetus to agriculture.

The country was experiencing distress to the extreme. In short, the country presented the picture of extreme poverty of the vast majority of the agricultural classes. The Vanniyar Community paid many taxes to the Government besides Land Tax, Road Cess, an Irrigation Cess, Village Service Cess, a toll upon caste, a municipal tax when a load was carried into a municipal town, a stamp duty and an additional duty called registration duty when he sold or mortgaged his land were collected. The results of these measures were oppressive land burdensome for ordinary people. The Vanniyar community suffered and resented on the severe taxation imposed by the Government. There can be no doubt that there was a feeling of uneasiness and perplexity amongst tax payers.  

**FOOD**

The staple food of the rich was rice while Ragi, Cambu (Bulrush Millet) and Cholam (Maize) of the poor classes. The workers consumed boiled grain and drank the water in which the grain was boiled. Drinking of toddy was prevalent. Coconut and gingelly oil were used for cooking. Castor oil was used for the lighting of lamps. Betal and tobacco

49. **Interview** with M. Muniyammal, Propaganda Secretary of Women’s wing Vanniyar Sangam, Vellore, dated 12th November, 1994.
were prevalent and they contributed a larger revenue to the Government.50

GRIEVANCES AND DEMANDS OF THE VANNIYAS

The main grievance of the community is that in spite of their huge size and concentration in the Northern districts of Tamil Nadu, proper attention has not been paid by the Government for their advancement. They expressed the view that in the remote villages their condition is akin to that of the Scheduled Castes and due to poverty and ignorance, they are forced to eke out their livelihood by doing mean occupations like scavenging.

The majority of the people of the community are confined to villages. Because of their predominant rural background, they could not get due share of the benefits extended by the Government for the Backward Classes in general. Ninety-five percent of the women are also engaged in manual labour owing to this situation, their children are not able to get proper education. It is alleged that the Vanniyas are treated very badly. Due to poor economic conditions and non-realisation of the importance of education, their children could not get adequate education.

50. Interview with T.M. Ramasamy, Secretary of Vanniyar Peravai, Madras, on 15-08-1994.
For the award of Scholarship, the minimum mark rule should be scrapped. The income limit for the award of scholarship should be raised to Rs.12,000. In the case of residential scholarships, the entire amount should be awarded to them. Adult education should be made compulsory and small scale industries should be started in the areas where Vanniyars are concentrated.

The representation of the people of this community in different fields is not proportionate to their population. Hence separate reservation of 20 percent in educational institutions and public service in required for them under compartmental reservation system. All benefits should be proportionately divided among the communities in the list of Backward Classes. The total quantum of reservation for Backward Classes is not enough for the quick and immediate advancement of Backward Classes in general. Hence it has to be enhanced from the 50 percent to 65 percent. The Vanniyas demanded that reservation should be provided at all levels.51

Training centres should be opened in each district for the Backward Classes in general, and Vanniyars in particular for giving

special coaching for the Civil Service Examinations. Meritorious graduate should be selected and encouragement should be extended to them upto the doctorate level of study.

The land belonging to the community was acquired by the Government for major schemes like Neyveli Lignite corporation in Cuddalore District, Mettur Power Plant etc. But the owner of the land were not given adequate benefits in the employment opportunities created by the projects. Adequate compensation has also not been given to them. Flow of benefits under the Tenants Act should be enforced and the bottlenecks removed. Land should be acquired for the benefit of Vanniyars and they should be awarded a long term loans for raising crops in them.

The leaders of this Community demand that in the admission of students to hostels, students from remote moffussil areas should be given preference. Certain groups among the Vanniyars live in hill areas like Uthalmalai, Pal Silambu in Harur Taluk, Kuduganadu, Thirudan Gundu Pail, Varattanapatti, Thottar Pondarkadu in Krishnagiri Taluk, Anjati, Thenkanikottai, Rayakottai, Theerathamalai in Hosur Taluk in Dharmapuri

52. Interview with N.M. Mani Varma, President of Vanniya Peravai, Madras, dated 15th July, 1991.
district and at Ondraikadu in Periyar district. They should be given Schedule Tribe Status.

Liberal assistance should be provided to the Vanniars for purchasing Milch animals, House sites, should be allotted to them for the construction of Houses, and financial assistance should be given for digging wells for irrigation. The assistance for these items should be on 50 percent subsidy and 50 percent loan basis. Intercaste marriages should be encouraged by the Government by awarding liberal prizes. They should be given preference in employment, besides provision of housing facilities.53

The Vanniya community realised the fact right from the beginning that unless they are united they could not project their problems and grievances in the right perspective and mitigate them. So they formed Associations and worked ceaselessly. It is worthwhile to mention here that, the Indian Government published the First Census Report in 1871, in which, the Vanniyas were classified as low caste. The learned leaders of Vanniyas, Messrs Sivapada Nayagar, Nayappakkam Veerawsamy Nayagar, P.T. Lee Chengalvaraya Nayagar met Gover, the Census

Superintendent and submitted a petition to him, praying that the Vanniyas might be classified as Kshatriyas in the then census returns. They were asked by the Census Superintendent to furnish the history of Vannivas.54

Accordingly, Jati Sangiraga Saaram was the first book written by Kunnam Munisami Pillai who established the fact that Pallis are the descendants of the fire race. His book induced the learned Vanniyas to think over the establishment of the Vanniyar Sangam.55

At first, Guruswamy Rayar inaugurated the Vanniyar Sangam at Cuddalore, and established many Vanniyar Sangam, in Villupuram District. He made the Vanniyar of Rayapuram to start a Sangam. Conjeevaram Annaswamy Nayagar was in the Government Service in the Military Department at Nilgiris. Inspired by the book Jati Sangiraga Saaram, he contemplated to start a Maha Sangam, in order to stress the Government to furnish the Vanniyas as Kshatriyas, in the Census Report

54. T. Aiyakannu Naicker, Vanniya Kula Vilakkam. op.cit., p.VIII.
55. Ibid. p.IX.
of 1891. He got transferred to Madras, on the advice of K. Gopal Nayagar.56

On 8-4-1888, the prominent members of the Vanniya Community assembled at the house of Aranganatha Nayagar, son of Sivapada Nayagar, under the presidency of Rao Sahib, T. Chellappa Nayagar and inaugurated the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangam, in order to represent to the Government that the Vanniyas might be classified as Kshatriyas in the census returns of 1891. The Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangam was registered at North Madras District Registrar's Office, on 4-8-1890, under the Central Act, 21 of 1860. The registration number is 12 of 1890-91.57

The main objects of the Maha Sangam are to preserve and promote the ancient customs of the community, to conduct schools and other educational institutions, and to publish books for their guidance and knowledge in social and religious studies.

An indepth study of the history of Vanniya Associations


57. Ibid.
commencing from 1888 to the present would reveal the fact that they have organised about 17 Associations so far by different leaders of Vanniya Community on different occasions at different places. The long list of those associations is given in the appendices. But all of them have common ideology and programme. Alleviation of the poverty among the Vanniya community, elimination of all stumbling block for their progress and advancement, dissemination of education and knowledge which was considered to be the basis for the progress of the community, establishment of educational institutions, creation of awareness, removal of ignorance and illiteracy and above all securing reservation in proportion to their population both in central and state services are the main planks of these Vanniya Associations. They endeavour to unite the Vanniyas and uplift them in their social and economic status. They are all non-political, as the founding-fathers of these associations felt that identifying them with a political party, howsoever popular it may be, would jeopardise the interest of the Vanniyas in the long run. Therefore, all of them invariably decided to function independently. The techniques adopted by these associations are giving representation to the authorities on specific grievances and problems of the community and seeking for their redressal; ventilating and projecting their issues in their proper respective in proper forums so as to gain support and popularity;
whenever the authorities fail to pay heed to their problems, they try to bring pressure on the Government by organising Road Roko Programme, Rail Roko Programme, hunger-strike programme and closure of shops. All that they want to achieve through these techniques and programmes is unity and welfare of Vanniyas.

Some of the noteworthy Vanniya Association are the following.
(a) Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam established by Thiru C. Annasamy Naicker and Thiru K. Gopala Naicker in 1888 at Royapuram Madras. (b) Tamil Nadu Vanniyar Peravai founded by Thiru N. M. Manivarma in Madras. (c) Tamil Nadu Vanniyar Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangam established by M.P. Rajagopal in Madras. (d) Tamil Nadu Vanniyar Manram started by Pulavar Mangala Mannan in Madras. (e) Vanniyar Sangam established by Vanniya Adigalar in 1984 at Madras.

During the freedom struggle, the Vanniyas played a major role in Tamil Nadu and many of them went to jail. The first person who protested against the English was Kathavarayan Chandavarayan, a Vanniyan. Before the arrival of Gandhi’s freedom struggle, the Vanniyas first adopted Satyagraham method to protest the British for Indian

freedom. Thillaiyadi Valliammai, the women freedom fighter of Tamil Nadu belonged to the Vanniya Community. Mayuram Naga Padayachi was a Vanniyar shot dead in an encounter to protest Gandhiji’s in South Africa. When Gandhi first came to Tamil Nadu he went to Naga Padayachi’s house and extended his thanks and consoled their family. Anjalai Ammaiayar, Janagi Thiruvengadam, Govindaswamy, Devagi Ammaiayar, Adikesavalu Naicker, Salem O. Subramaniya, S.K. Govinda Raja Naicker, Rajarisi are the freedom fighters of the Community. Rajarisi was a notable poet of this community, who wrote a number of verses on freedom which inculcate independence in the minds of the people.59

After independence some of the most prominent and influential leaders of the Vanniya Community strongly felt that unless they are associated with politics and identify themselves as a political party, it would be very difficult to achieve their aims and solve their problems. The most notable among them were S.S. Ramasamy Padayachi, M.A. Manikavelu Naicker and R. Markabandu. As a result of their consistent and ceaseless efforts, some political parties came into existence with the sole aim of improving the Vanniyas. The Toilers Party, Common Weal Party and Toilers progressive party are the main among them. Thus the

Vanniya movement took a political shape.60

The Vanniya movement took a political shape.60 The Vanniyas convened a major conference of the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Sangam on a State-wide basis in 1951, on the eve of 1952 general election.61 The Conference resolved that the Vanniyars should contest the elections "in co-operation with the toiling masses", and formed a political party called the Tamil Nadu Toiler's party. The leading spirits in the Conference were men with modern and cosmopolitan qualifications rather than hereditary and traditional ones. Two of the most significant were M. A. Manickavelu Naicker, a lawyer with experience in earlier State-wide party activities, notably the Swarajya party and S.S. Ramaswamy padaiyachi, a young man (33 in 1951), a high school graduate and chairman of the Cuddalore Municipal Council, Member of the South Arcot District Board and then man who was narrowly defeated for its presidency in 1949. The name of Padaiyachi and Naicker, especially the former, provided and effective signal for caste solidarity in voting. Padaiyachi's youth is an interesting

60. Interview with Dr. Ramadoss on 20th May, 1990.
commentary on leadership patterns in castes coming to political self-consciousness; older members of lower castes generally do not command the necessary skills in communication and education for State-Wide organisation.

With the full support to the Vanniya people in Kanchipuram, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai M.A. Manickavelu started the Common Weal Party, in 1951. Being the single largest community the Vanniyas did not get sufficient representation in Legislative Assembly and the Parliament. In the General Election in 1952, three candidates from Commonweal party contested for Parliament. All the 3 candidates won the election. They were Dr. T. Ramachandran, N.R. Muniswami and Dr. A. Krishnaswamy. In Assembly Election, ten Commonweal candidates contested, but only six got success. After the general election M.A. Manickavelu became popular in Tamil Nadu.

In this election, the performance of the Tamil Nadu Toiler’s party was also quite impressive. It had captured 19 seats in the Madras

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63. Ibid.
Legislature and won in four constituencies in the parliament. Some important Tamil Nadu Toiler's party who have got elected in the Assembly election were S.S. Ramaswami Padayachi elected from Cuddalore (General) Constituency, A. Govindaswami Nayagar elected from Vikravandi and V. Gopal Gounder elected from Melmalayanoor. The four Tamil Nadu Toiler's party M.Ps were (1) T. Muniswami elected from Tindivanam (General). (2) A. Jayaraman elected from Tindivanam (Reserve). (3) N.D. Govindaswami Kachirayar elected from Cuddalore (General). (4) V. Boovarahaswamy Padaiyachi elected from Perambalur (General).64

In this election, the Congress party failed to win a majority in the Madras State legislature and in its search for enough legislators backing to form its ministry, it succeeded in persuading the six commonweal party members of the legislature to support the congress Ministry. In return, Manickavelu Naicker, the leader of Commonweal party was given a seat in the Ministry. This event delighted many Vanniyars but won him public catcalls from the Tamil Nadu Toilers, who decided to remain in the opposition.

K. Kamaraj assumed the office of Chief Minister in the year 1954 and the Tamil Nadu Toilers party decided to support K. Kamaraj’s ministry. S.S. Ramasamy Padayachi joined the Ministry. So that the Vanniyars could now call two out of eight seats of the Ministry as their own.

In this chapter, a brief survey of the origin of the Vanniyar Community, the different views of eminent authorities on its origin, the divisions within the Vanniyar Community, the beliefs, customs and practices and in short the Socio-Economic profile of the Vanniyar Community have been discussed. This analysis would help the better understanding of the Socio-Economic problems confronting the community.

A survey of the position of Women is carried out. The very fact that the Vanniyar women donated gifts to build temples indicate their faith in religion. Lack of basic education and consequent backwards of Vanniyar ladies is conspicuous. Vanniyar Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangam was established to preserve and promote the ancient customs of the community, to conduct schools and other educational institutions to uplift the Vanniyar. It was followed by the founding of a number of associations by the various leaders of the Vanniyar community on different occasions at different places. But all of them have common ideology and programmes. They endeavour to unite the vanniyar and uplift them.
These non-political associations later took the shape of political parties.

The Pattali Makkal Katchi, an off-shoot of Vanniyar Sangam was primarily interested in the welfare of the Vanniyar Community especially in its Socio-Economic development. Consequently, PMK was able to evolve its strategy and programmes with a view to ventilating the grievances of the community and seeking redressal.

The involvement of the Vanniyar Association in politics engendered conflict within the Association also. Many Vanniyas felt that the Congress did not give them adequate reward for their support as promised. They were disappointed especially when they came to know that the congress Government did not come forward to secure adequate reservation to the Vanniyas in education and employment. They stressed that the Government should evolve a clear reservation policy which could secure them these two rights.