CHAPTER – II

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Society during the Caṅkam* Age:

A bright period in the history of the Tamils is the Caṅkam age which may be placed between second century B.C. and third century A.D.\(^1\) Data concerning the society during this period is available from anthologies of Tamil literature, notable of which are Eṭṭuttokai (eight anthologies) and Paṭtuppattu (ten idylls). Certain anthologies like Paripāṭal, Kalīṭṭokai and Tirumuruṟṟuppattai seem to have been produced at a later period.\(^2\)

The Caṅkam literature depicts a simple society divided horizontally on regional and professional lines. The whole country was divided into four natural regions called Kuriñci, Mullai, Maruṭam, and Neṭal.\(^3\) These represented the hilly, forested, plain, and littoral regions. Arid tracts were called Pālai.

\(^{*}\)Caṅkam is also written as Saṅgam.
Each region was inhabited by people whose profession was suited to the region. The inhabitants of the Kurinci region were hunters. They were called 'Eyinar, Vettuvar, Kanavar and Kuravar.' These names were derived either from their vocation or habitation. For instance, the name Vettuvar was derived from Vettai meaning hunting. Those who lived in the Mullai region were specialists in dairy farming and sheep-breeding. Kovalas, and Itaiyas were the names by which the people of this region were known. Each name indicated a particular profession. For instance, the word Itai means middle and the word Itadyar could be taken to mean those who lived in the region lying between Kurinci and Marutam.

Marutam, the region best suited for cultivation, was occupied by Ulavar who might have derived this name from the word 'ulavu' which means cultivation. Paraṭavar were the people who lived in the Neital region. Their chief occupation was fishing, and they also sold pearls. The Pālai region was occupied by Maravar, Mallar, and Malavar. These people were well-versed in the martial arts and they served as chieftains and soldiers. Mara means heroism and those who indulged in heroic deeds were called Maravas.
Ancient Tamil region also contained people who were connected with the fine arts. The Pānar were bards who were trained in different aspects of music. Probably, the word Pānar is derived from the word pan which means musical note. Those who beat a drum called Tuti to announce the declaration of war were known as Tutian. The epithet Pulaiya is also assigned to the Tutian. Those who plaited the straps of cots and performed obsequies in the funeral ground were also called Pulaiya. Pulaiyai, the female of the Pulaiya, was engaged in washing clothes. The ancient Tamil society also contained Brahmins who were called Antanar, Pārppār, and Irupirappālar. They were regarded to be pure in body and soul and that they were twice-born.

It is seen from the above that during the Caukham age there were a number of social groups in the Tamil region. Social divisions were geographical and horizontal, and not hierarchical and vertical. We shall now try to trace the practice of untouchability and segregation among the groups mentioned.

What is discernible from the Caukham classics is
that none of the groups were treated as Untouchables. Those groups which, in later times, came to be regarded as Untouchables or Depressed Classes, enjoyed better social status in the ancient Tamil region. For instance, the
Paratavas who came to be regarded as Untouchables in later times, are described in glowing terms in the Caṅkam classics. To cite one instance, poet Unpoti Pacunkutiyār showers praises on the Cōla king Ilaṅcēt Cenni as one who defeated the Southern Paratavar and Northern Vatukar.\textsuperscript{13}
From this and similar references it may be inferred that the Paratavars were originally an independent tribe who were later conquered and suppressed by the Cōlas and Pāndyas.

The Kuravas, another group of people seem to have occupied an honoured place in the ancient Tamil society. But they were considered by the British rulers as a criminal tribe. Poetess Ilaveyiniyār was a Kurava who composed a poem in praise of Ėraikkōn, describing him as a great Kurava chieftain.\textsuperscript{14} From this and similar references it is possible for us to deduce that the Kuravas were literates and possessed extraordinary powers.
The British regarded the Maravas and Kallas also as criminal tribes. But these people are praised as an ancient among the Tamils. Marava ladies are described as the ancient wise women. The Maravas are a people who are noted for their heroism and blood-thirsty nature.

The Mallar and Mallavar were also martial people who lived in the Caṅkam age. There is reference to indicate that the Mallas became Pallas of later times. Mukkūṭa Pallu, of later literature, while describing the idyllic life of the Pallas, clearly identifies them with Mallas. The Vēlans of the Tamil region acted as priests to God Muruga during the Caṅkam age. The descendants of Vēlans are to be found now in Kērala and not in Tamil Nādu. The Kurumpas, who are a Depressed Class in modern Kērala and Karnātaka, are spoken of as an independent people in the Caṅkam classics. Avvaiyār, the poetess of the Caṅkam age, praises king Netumān-Aṇci as one who conquered the many forts of Kurumpas.

It has been noted earlier that the Pānas occupied an enviable position in the ancient Tamil society. They
were minstrels: Kings and chieftains showered gifts on the Panas. They lived a luxurious life. The view that the Panas were "a people at the lower rung of society and wandering minstrels" seems to have been caused by the knowledge of the conditions of Panas of modern Kerala and Madurai where they are regarded as Untouchables. The enviable position of the Panas in the Cākam age has been fully established by modern scholars.

The Paraiyas, who form the major portion of the Depressed Classes in modern Tamil Nadu, occupied a respectable position in the society during the Cākam age. Paraiyas are mentioned only once in Puranāmūru where it is said that there is no clan other than the four, namely Paraiyan, Pānan, Tutian and Katampan. Paraiyas are not spoken of as a low class people anywhere in the Cākam classics. The Tutias, on the other hand, are spoken of as 'iliciinan' and ilipirappalan meaning "degraded person" and "low-born person". The Tutias were also called as 'Pulaiyas', meaning impure persons. But it is not possible to conclude from this that the Pulaiyas were a separate social unit and that they were segregated from the rest.
There is much evidence to support the view that there was much intermingling among groups of people living in the different regions. This is amply revealed from the Caṅkam literature. There were also instances of inter-group marriages. Since Pānas dined with kings and Brāhmins, we may infer that there was inter-dining in the society too.

People denoted by a particular class title performed different functions also. For instance, the Pānas, who were specialists in music, did fishing too. Brāhmins served as messengers and goldsmiths. The Pulaiyas too performed different tasks. This was not prevalent in the cities where there was the influence of Āryan culture. The Āṇṭanas are spoken of in large cities only. They had the patronage of kings. There is no evidence to prove that the influence of Varnāsrama Dharma was felt during the Caṅkam age. Only the Brāhmins were spoken of as twice-born. There were no taboos against meat-eating and drinking. Even Brāhmins ate meat. Brāhminism touched only the fringe of the Caṅkam society. As a consequence, there was some amount of social stratification in the cities while in the rural areas there was perfect mobility and intermingling between different
groups of people. There is no indication to prove that there existed Untouchables or Depressed Classes during this period. Traces of Untouchability became evident only during the post-Caṅkam age.

**Origin of Untouchability in the Ancient Tamil Region:**

The gradual conversion of a hitherto simple and flexible society into a complex and stratified one took place during the post-Caṅkam age, i.e., between 300 and 600 A.D. Certain professions came to be regarded as impure. The works of this period reveal the presence of Untouchability. The influence of the Vedic ideals of Varnāsrama Dharma is revealed in the Tamil work of this period, Tolkāppiyam. The existence of four classes, Antanar (Brāhmīns), Aracar (Kings), Vanikar (Traders) and Vēlāmāntar (Cultivators) is mentioned in this work. These four classes are more or less, identical with those of the Vedic period. Occupational hierarchy also is hinted at by Tolkāppiyam. Each class of people should confine itself to its respective occupation. Though Tolkāppiyam speaks of social stratification, it does not
mention Untouchability. In the other literary works of the post-Cañkam age also there is no mention of Untouchability.

In the later Cañkam works like Manimekalai, there is mention of the "four Varnas." The man who ferries boats is described in the poetical work Nāladiār as belonging to the last Varna. From these it may be inferred that the caste system was gaining acceptance in the Tamil society during the later Cañkam age. Hereditary professions were fast becoming identified with particular caste groups. This is inferred from the declaration made by Mūnurai Araiyanār that "hereditary arts are understood without learning." But there is no evidence to show the presence of Untouchability during this period. Certain people were regarded as belonging to low castes or as low born because they performed tasks like killing animals, washing clothes, plaiting cots, handling dead bodies, beating drums, etc. But such people were not regarded as Untouchables. Even the Pānas and Valluvas who occupied exalted positions in the society during the Cañkam age later became Untouchables. It was during the period of the later Cañkam works that the idea of
ceremonial purity and impurity cropped up in the minds of the people in the Tamil society.

In Āchārakōvai, a very late product among the post-Caṅkam works, there is mention of Untouchability. It is stated in this work that people should bathe before worshipping gods if they had touched a low caste man. It is hard to infer from this whether it denoted permanent Untouchability or temporary ceremonial impurity which could be removed by purificatory both. The origin of Untouchability in the Tamil society during the later Caṅkam age may be attributed to the influence of Dharmasāstras. The ideas derived from the Dharmasāstras later on took first root when castes were identified with professions and the attachment of impurity and purity to the professions. Untouchability in the Tamil society resulted from the fusion between the indigenous vocational grouping system and the Varnāshrama system. The latter was evidently borrowed from Sanskrit literature.

"Āryan system based on Varna and Dravidian pattern based principally on occupation came to be combined in due course into an unified whole, not always with happy results."
Untouchability during the
Medieval Period:

During the Medieval period in the Tamil region, especially during the days of the Imperical Colas and Vijayanagar kings, Brāhmanical Hinduism was at its peak of glory and power. It was now that Varnāshrama or the four-fold caste system became firmly entrenched in the minds of the people. As a result, the condition of the low caste people began to worsen. A study of the inscriptions of this period shows that certain privileges were given to the low caste people, particularly to the Paraiyas. Individual Paraiyas occupied exalted positions in society. Though some were educated and rich, many began to be reduced to servitude as agricultural slaves. The literature of this period, especially the devotional songs of Vaishnavite Ālvārs and Saivite Nāyānmārs, shows the miserable condition of the low caste people.

During the reign of the Imperial Colas and the Vijayanagar kings, the Paraiyas seem to have enjoyed many privileges. They worked as agricultural labourers and as drum beaters and weavers. After the harvest, the paddy was measured only by a Paraiyan. 32 The Paraiyas who
worked in the fields were known as Ulaparaiyar and they lived in separate Cēris. An inscription of Rāja Rāja I, dated A.D. 1014, speaks of the Cēris of Ulaparaiyar on the eastern and western ends of the main village as being exempt from taxation. But certain Paraiya villages were taxed. We hear of the gift of the income from a Paraicēri to a temple of Siva even as late as the period of the Vijayanagar king, Immadi Bukkanna (1394 A.D.). Some Paraiyas even served as Talaiyāris or village watchmen. Such village watchmen were subject to taxation and this tax was called Vetti or Talaiyari. In modern times, the Vettian became the Tōti of the village. His functions were scavenging, distribution of water from the village tank to the cultivators, carrying news of death to the relatives of the deceased, digging graves and disposing of the dead.

It seems that some Paraiyas were engaged in weaving during the Medieval period. They were known as Nesava-Paraiyas and their looms were called Paraithari. A tax called Paraithari Yirai was levied on them. The beating of drums during festive occasions, marriages and funerals was another function in which the Paraiyas were engaged. This function was performed by them even during
During the Medieval period tax was levied on those who beat drums. An inscription of Rāja Rāja III mentions a tax called Paraiyirai. The drum beating Paraiyas did not have lands of their own and they subsisted on the perquisites granted to them by villages. Sometimes they were given rent free land called Paraithudaimai.

There is enough evidence to support the claim that the Paraiyas occupied notable positions in the society during the Medieval period. Some of the Paraiyas were rich enough to make donations to temples. One Pattāra Nambi, son of Mangalanāttu Paraiyan made a gift of a hall called Swapna-Mandapa to a temple. The fact that Paraiyas were also heroic fighters is borne out by the erection of memorials to heroic Paraiyas. The Colas and Pandyas had a regiment each known as Valaṅgai Māntar. Most of the men of this regiment must have been Paraiyas because they were also known by the name Valaṅgai Māntar. Rāja Rāja Cōla had a special regiment called Valaṅgai Vēlaikkārā Gēnai. The Paraiyas also found place in village assemblies called on to decide important matters. The Paraiya leaders who took part in such assemblies were called Parai
Mudalis. As noted earlier, some Paraiyas were educated and they could sign their names. Many of the inscriptions of Pudukottai State support this view.

All the Paraiyas do not seem to have occupied an esteemable position in society during the Medieval period. It seems that some of the Paraiyas and Pulaiyas were regarded as low in society and were subjected to many disabilities. There were separate Cēris and burial grounds for the Paraiyas. It is stated in an inscription of Rāja Rāja I that the lands occupied by certain castes, were exempt from taxation. The Cēris occupied by certain castes were called as Thīndāceris or Untouchables Cēris. Since Paraiceri and Thīndāceri are mentioned separately in the same line of the inscription, a doubt arises as to whether the Untouchables were different from the Paraiyas. The Paraiyas are denoted as the lowest caste in other inscriptions. In the same inscription the names of Pānar, Paraiyar, and Parei Mudali are found along with the names of Sivabrāhmīns, Chakkilis, etc. We may infer from this that all sections of Paraiyas were not regarded as lowest in the society during this period. Arippān and grass cutting Paraiyas were considered as the lowest. But all sections of Paraiyas were definitely inferior in
status to Vellalas and Brāhmīns for whom separate burial grounds are spoken of. 41

The reason for assigning the lowest status in society to the Paraiyas and other communities may be attributed to the emergence of the conception of sacredness of the cow and the consequent hatred towards those who ate beef. In an inscription of Rāja Rāja III, the imprecation for violating the injunction of the inscription was to acquire the sin of eating the flesh of the cow. 42 In the battle field the soldiers were exhorted not to injure women, children, Antanas (Brahmins), and cows. 43 The cow was useful to the cultivator and the Brāhmin for different reasons and it came to be venerated because of the influence of Brāhmanical Hinduism. Those poor sections of the society which consumed beef out of economic necessity became polluting castes and they were kept segregated from the rest of the communities during the Medieval period.

There is evidence to prove the prevalence of social ostracism during the Medieval period. An inscription of Rajadhiraja II dated A.D. 1177 says that these
classes which are engaged as labourers shall not become Vel and Arasu. (These were titles conferred by kings on distinguished citizens.) Kāvidis, Potters, Drummers (evidently Paraiyas), Weavers and Barbers shall not keep locks of hair on their heads. They shall not make use of Pērigai (a big drum) during mourning and on joyous occasions and shall not keep slaves. A woman wedded to a slave, on the death of her husband, shall become the property of the master of her husband along with the lands, jewels, cattle and other valuables of the deceased. It will not be wrong to conclude, based on the foregoing evidence, that the Paraiyas and Pulaiyas of the Tamil region during the Medieval period were subjected to the twin evils of untouchability and slavery.

**Literary Evidences:**

There is no explicit statement about untouchability in the literature of the Medieval period. It is only to be inferred from certain descriptions about some communities being regarded as Untouchables. Both Saivite and Vaishnavite literature allude to the division of society
into four main castes and designate the rest as Candālas. Nammālvar, a Vaishnavite devotee of this period, declares that the devotees of Vishnu and their devotees in succession are fit for adoration even though they are Candālas of the worst type and far, for degraded from the four high castes. 45 Periapurāṇam, 46 a great Saivite work of this period, mentions the Pulaiyas as lower than the four castes. Devāram, a Saivite collection of devotional hymns, describes the Pulaiyas as those who skin the cow and eat its flesh. 47 The adjectives used by Manikkavāsagar, a great saint of the Medieval period, along with the term Pulaiya, bring out the loneliness of this community. He mentions the Pulaiya as one who had been consecrated at the gate of the temple of Siva. 48 From this, it may be inferred that the Pulaiyas were not admitted inside the temple during this period. It is evident that the Paraiyas and Pulaiyas were segregated and treated as Untouchables during the Medieval period.

Saivite and Vaishnavite Attitudes Towards Caste and Untouchability During the Medieval Period:

There was a great religious ferment in South India during the Medieval period. This was particularly evident
in the Tamil region. The Nāyanmārs of Saivism and the
Ālvārs of Vaishnavism, who became pioneers of the Bhakti
Movements in India, rose in the Tamil region during this
period. Being infant sects within Hinduism and faced
with the necessity of fighting against Buddhism and
Jainism which were widespread in the Tamil region during
this time, these two sects, in the beginning, took a
distinctly catholic attitude towards caste rigidity as
as to attract more and more people from different walks
of life to the new sects.

According to the Vaishnavites of the Tamil region,
the caste system or the Varna system intruded into Tamil
society. To prove that there was no caste rigidity in
the ancient Hindu society, scholars cite the instances
of Viswāmitra, a Kshatriya, who became a Brahmarishi by
means of penance (tapas), and Tiricāñku, a Kshatriya,
who became a Candāla by foul deeds and who, after perfor-
m ing a yaga (Sacrifice) became purified and entered
heaven. Varnas, therefore, are determined according
to good or bad deeds only. One who has no Bhakti or
devotion to God is a Sudra. Even a Brahmin become a
Candāla if he does not perform his duties and a Candāa
becomes the guru of a Brāhmaṇ if he is a true devotee. For instance, Somasarma, a Brāhmaṇ, became a Brahmaraṇkhasa (demon) after his death because he did not complete his Yāga and he was redeemed only when he surrendered at the feet of Nambaduvan, a Candāla devotee and poet. Even a person belonging to the low caste becomes a Brāhmaṇ by devotion to Vishnu. Those caste Brāhmaṇs who ridicule such devotees automatically become Candālas. Even Brāhmaṇs must accept such low caste devotees as their gurus or masters and raise themselves in spiritual status. A devotee of Vishnu, even though he is an eater of dog's flesh, is superior to a Brāhmaṇ. High caste people could truly interdine and intermarry with low caste people if they are devotees of God. Vaishnavism of the Tamil region, during the Medieval period, made devotion to God as the criterion of highness or lowness of caste. But it accepted the presence of low castes by birth and untouchability. It contended that the purity of the body and mind of a devotee would be lost if he ate the food touched by a Candāla or by activity. Speaking of the superiority of Tiruvōymoli, the Tamil Bible of Vaishnavites, to Sanskrit Vēdas, the author of Acharya Hirudayam compares the former to a gold pot which can be
touched by any caste and the latter to a mud pot which
cannot be touched by all castes. The Tamil scriptures could be read by all, irrespective of their caste
while the Sanskrit Vedas could be read only by the
Brāhmans. The fact remains that there were untouchable castes in the Tamil society during the Medieval period and that they could raise their communal status by devotion.

Many of the Vaishnavite Alvars were of humble birth. It is said that Lord Vishnu purposely manifested himself among the Sudras and the Untouchables in order to humble the pride of the high castes and to demonstrate to them the truth that caste is no barrier to salvation.

Sri. Ramanuja, the founder of the Visishtādvaīta philosophy of Vaishnavism, set an example to his followers in condemning caste system and untouchability. Though he was a Brahmin, Ramanuja accepted Perianambi, a Sudra, as his teacher or preceptor. Ramanuja was persecuted by the Cōla king Kulottuṅga and hence he sought asylum in Mysore. He ordained that the Panchamas should be admitted into the temple of Melkota on three days in a year during
thecarfestival. Ramanuja converted a number of Sudras and Untouchables into Vaishnavites and named them as "Thirukkulathār," meaning people of the holy caste. He broadcast to the people at large the secret mantra though he has been warned that he would go to hell if he divulged it to others. Ramanuja always kept beside him Urangāvilli Thāsar, a Sudra by caste, and declared that his body became pure by the touch of the body of Urangāvilli.

Thiruppānālvār was another illustrious saint who sprang from among the Untouchables of Uraiyur in Tiruchirāppalli. He was born in the family of Pānas, an Untouchable caste. Thirumalisai Ālvār, though was born of a Rishi or saint, was brought up by the family of a Rishi or saint, was brought up by the family of a low caste Piramban by name Thiruvalan. Thirumāṅgai Ālvār, another great Vaishnavite saint, was a Mlechhe by birth. He was a robber by profession.

Saivism, though it became very orthodox later, was a very catholic sect of Hinduism during its early period. It was open to all castes and communities.
Though it accepted the existence of high and low castes based on birth, it emphasized the efficacy of devotion to Siva in removing the barrier of caste. Appiar, the great Saivite saint of seventh century A.D., declares, "though one does not have good birth, that which gives much good according to birth is Panchakstra."

Some of the Saivite Nāyanmārs who are being worshipped in Siva temples today were from the so-called Untouchable castes. Nandanār, a great saint of Saivism who lived during 8th Century A.D., was a Paraiya or Pulaiya by caste. Another saint who belonged to the Untouchable community was Thirukurippu Tondar who was a washerman by caste. Thiru Nilakanta Yālpanar was born in the family of Pāṇas. Enāthi Nāyanār, another Saivite saint, belonged to the Shanar or Iluva caste.

As for Sankara (788 - 820 A.D.), the founder of Advaita philosophy, it can be said that theoretically he was against caste and untouchability. But he was a great upholder of Varnāshrama Dharma. Like Sankara and Rāmanuja, Madhva (1199 - 1273), the founder of the
Bhāgavata cult (worship of Krishna as taught by the Bhāgavata Purāṇa) was also very catholic in his attitude towards caste. He is said to have admitted people of all castes into his sect. His successor, Vādirāja, brought large groups of outlying Souegars into the four varna fold. 64

The Lingāyat/Veerasaiva movement of Bāsava, started in the twelfth century A.D., in Karnataka, was an unmistakable protest against caste claims. Bāsava stressed Bhakti or devotion to God as the true mark of superiority. Bāsava, though he was a Brāhmin minister, arranged the marriage between a Brāhmin girl and an Untouchable. This was opposed by people of Bāsava's community and the king. For the sake of reform, Bāsava abdicated his ministership and devoted the rest of his life in activities of reform. The followers of Bāsava, who are called Lingayats, are mostly found in Karnataka and they are a casteless sect noted for their devotion to social reforms, especially the uplift of the Depressed Classes. Bāsava mixed freely with low-born devotees and even dined with them. He had disciples from all castes. Among his disciples, Madivala Machayya was a washerman, Kumbara Gundayya was a potter,
Dohar Kākkayya was a tanner, and Madara Chennayya was a cobbler. An interesting feature of the Medieval period was the growth of Saivite and Vaishnavite mutts. They must have originated sometime before the reign of Rāja Rāja I, and their number and influence increased considerably during the reign of his successors. The mutts of this period helped the pilgrims, tended the sick and rendered humanitarian service irrespective of caste. Untouchability seems to have been absent in these institutions.

The philosophy of Saiva Siddhānta, first formulated by Meykandar during the early part of the thirteenth century and developed by Umāpati Sivāchārya who lived during the later part of the thirteenth and early part of the fourteenth centuries, is also "a system which transcends caste and ritual and calls for inner devotion." The Siddhās (meaning the perfected) of the Tamil region, who lived between the 13th and 16th centuries, were the most vehement critics of the caste system and the rituals.

It must be admitted that during the Medieval period, the four-fold caste system and the notion of ceremonial
impurity had taken firm roots in the Tamil society. Though religious leaders were highly critical of these phenomena, people observed them very vigorously.

**The Valaṅgai and Idāṅgai Factions:**

A peculiar feature of the Medieval Tamil society was its division into two broad classes known as Valaṅgai and Idāṅgai, meaning right hand and left hand. Each of these two groups contained ninety-eight castes which claimed certain exclusive privileges. It was usual for the Valaṅgai castes to claim superiority over the Idāṅgai once though the latter also asserted themselves as superior at times. This led to factional fights between the rival groups. Though both groups included high and low castes, it was usual for the low castes like the Paraiyas and Pallas to take a leading part in the struggle. The higher castes like the Vellāḷās and the Brahmins kept themselves away from the factional quarrels and offered their services as arbitrators to settle the disputes.

An analysis of the factional fights between the Valangai and Idangai factions forms an important aspect
of the study of untouchability during the Medieval period because it was the final attempt made by some of the low castes to raise themselves in the social hierarchy so as to prevent their falling into the abysmal pit of untouchability.

It was during the reign of the Imperial Colas that the transition from the ancient caste system based on profession to the Varnāshrama system or four-fold caste system based solely on birth took place. The Brāhmans who were imbued with the ideal of Varnāshrama system as enshrined in the Vēdas and the Smritis, foisted it on the already existing caste system and thereby established their superiority over others. After having made their position secure, the Brāhmans conceded the status of Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras to the fighting, trading, and cultivating castes in the Tamil society. In this process, a large number of artisan castes and working classes were left out of the four-fold caste system and they were assigned the position of avarnas or Untouchables according to the injunctions of the Dharmasastras. This arrangement was resented by certain influential castes like the Kammālas who tried
to supersede or at least rise equal to the Brāhmīns by inventing legends corresponding to those of the Smritis which glorify the Brāhmīns. In their anxiety to preserve their status in society, a large number of castes which could not be accommodated within the four-fold caste system, aligned themselves artificially with the Valaṅgai and Idaiṅgai groups. Unfortunately, their efforts at regaining their lost status did not bear fruit. There was only further deterioration of the Idangai castes.

The temple-building and military activities of the Tamil kings gave rise to new castes and the influx of immigrant castes from the conquered regions. When these castes, owing to their usefulness, were recognised and given prominence by the kings, the indigenous castes felt jealous and protested against the higher position assigned to the new castes. Factional fights and disputes followed. In such quarrels, the dictum, 'might is right' was ultimately vindicated. The right-hand castes which supported the kings and which received their support in return, triumphed over the left-hand groups. The vanquished left-hand groups, in course of time, degenerated into Untouchables. Even among the right-hand castes,
those who performed the so-called impure jobs were, in due course, reduced to the position of untouchability. During the Medieval period, those classes which were relegated to the lowest level in social hierarchy tried to rise up in the estimation of others by inventing fantastic stories about their origins and lost privileges. The higher castes encouraged the lower ones to fight among themselves so that the former could continue to maintain their superior position in society.

There is no conclusive or authentic proof regarding the origin of the Valaṅgai and Idaṅgai classes. Their origin is shrouded in mystery. Many traditions are attributed to the origin of these two groups. Both the traditional and mythical origin of the two groups cannot be regarded as genuine.

It is also stated that recruitment of soldiers by the kings was a cause for the two divisions. It is indeed difficult to substantiate this view. T.W. Ellis regards the economic factor as the reason for the emergence of the right and left hand groups. But there are several weaknesses in his argument and hence it is
unacceptable. Social precedence claimed by the earlier immigrants is regarded as a reason for the emergence of the two factions. This view too is not free from shortcomings.

Whatever may be the real cause for the emergence of the two rival factions, in the beginning, the central issue between these two groups seems to have been the conformity or non-conformity to the social and religious habits of Brahmins, their patrons and followers on one side and the Kammālas and their adherents on the other side. The Paraiyas and Chetti’s were among the Valangai castes while the Kammālas and Pallas were prominent among the Idaṅgai group. Those belonging to the Valangai faction were more privileged than the Idaṅgai group. The privileges enjoyed by them were given by the kings and the Nattars, their chieftains, whose decisions were influenced by religious, social and political factors.

During the initial stages, the Valangai and Idaṅgai groups had cordial social relationships. They often met together and agreed to act together in certain
common matters. At times, the two groups united together for common purposes. Though they fully supported the Valaṅgai classes, the Brāhmīns and the Vellālas seem to have kept themselves aloof from the factional feuds from the beginning. The quarrels which arose between the two groups were on grounds of petty privileges and social etiquette.

The Valaṅgai and Idaṅgai class system which arose in the Medieval period, initially as a power struggle between the Kammālas and Brāhmīns, slowly enveloped the whole society and degenerated into petty feuds among various castes, especially in the lower rungs of the social ladder, based on certain imaginary charters. The feuds continued even during the modern period till the early stages of Company rule and then they slowly died out.

The Modern Period:

The Muslim rulers who ruled over parts of the Tamil region were partial towards the Depressed Classes. Neither equally nor liberty were extended to these
classes. Positions were given to caste Hindus and not to the members of the Depressed Classes. These rulers did not want to incur the displeasure of the higher castes by extending privileges to the Depressed Classes. Untouchability continued to be practiced even during Muslim hegemony in parts of the Presidency of Madras.

After the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in 1565, many parts of the Tamil region came under the rule of the Nayaks. The Nayaks of Madurai ruled from 1529 to 1736 A.D. The Nayaks of Thanjavur were powerful between 1530 and 1542 A.D., the Nayaks of Ginjee had hegemony from 1530 to 1620 A.D., the Nayaks of Vellore ruled from 1530 to 1646 A.D., and the Nayaks of Ikkêri held sway between 1530 and 1663 A.D. The Nayaks were the representatives of the Vijayanagar Empire. With the destruction of Vijayanagar at the battle of Talaikotta in 1665, more than a million Telugu speaking people emigrated into the Tamil region. Most of the time of the Nayaks' rule was taken up by battles. There was very little time left for them to set right the civic affairs and maintain law and order and to prevent the total anarchy which prevailed most of the time in their kingdoms. Consequently, the
Depressed Classes could not hope to get any consideration at the hands of the rulers.

The bulk of the agricultural labourers was from the Depressed Classes. That their condition was deplorable is borne out by Sewell. He says,

"... the ryots of South India were grievously oppressed by the nobles, when subject to Hindu Government... the mass of the people (were) ground down and living in the greatest poverty and distress." 69

Dr. R. Caldwell says:

"Judge, therefore, not merely by modern European standards of right and wrong, but even by the standards furnished by Hindus and Mohammadan books of authority, the Nayaks must be decided to have fallen for short of their duty as rulers. Their reigns record little more than a disgraceful catalogue of debaucheries, treacheries, plunderings, oppressions, murders and civil commotions relieved only by the factitious splendour of gifts to temples, idols and priests by means of which they apparently succeeded in getting the Brahmins and poets to speak well of them and thus in keeping the mass of the people patient under their misrule." 70

It is easy to infer from this that the general condition of the Depressed Classes was extremely deplorable.
The collapse of the established order, the constant presence of the threat of foreign invasions, the independent spirit of the inhabitants and the inability of the new sovereigns to assert their authority in overwhelming strength created a situation favourable for the rise of the 'Poligari System' in the Tamil region. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were numerous 'Pālayams' in the area. Most of them were concentrated in Tirunelveli, Madurai, Rāmanāthapura, Thanjavur, Tiruchirāppalli, Dindigul, and Coimbatore. The Poligars of western Tirunelveli and Rāmanāthapura were mostly of Marava community, those of Madurai, Tiruchirāppalli and Thanjavur were of Kallar tribes and those of Eastern Tirunelveli, Dindigul and Coimbatore were Nāyaks or Totians. Early in the Nāyak period there were about seventy-two Poligars in Madurai country alone. The Nāyaks associated the Poligars with administration. The Poligars were allowed to collect taxes and were required to pay one-third of the collections as tribute to the sovereign.

In the villages the vast majority of agricultural labourers belonged to the Depressed Class called Palls.
They were the counterparts of the serf in the baronial estates of Europe. These workers never received wages sufficient enough to live above marginal subsistence. Their poverty was so great that they were constrained to sell their services for long terms. According to local custom their masters had every right to extract every kind of service from them, to mortgage them, to hire them out, and even transfer them to another person. The Pallās were found in large numbers in Trinelvely and Ramānāthapuram areas. With the establishment of Nāyāk rule in madurai, there took place a large-scale migration of Telugu speaking Reddis and others into the areas. The Nāyaks, with the assistance of the Maravas, forcibly took away the properties of the Pallās and assigned them to the immigrants. It was thus that these people were reduced to agricultural servitude. Neither under the Nāyaks nor under the Poligars was there any solace or relief for these poor Depressed Class people. Coupled with this was the casteism and lordism introduced by the Brāhmins.

With the extension of the domains of the Telugū kings in the Tamil areas, there took place large-scale migration of Brāhmins. The Vijayanagar kings also sent
large members of Telugu Brāhmīns to control their southern conquests. The Brāhmīns were assigned fertile lands and their dwellings were erected for them by the rulers who showered on them costly gifts. When the Marāthas captured Thanjavur, they did likewise. The Nāyaks of Madurai and the Marātha rulers of Thanjavur had Brāhmīns as their ministers. Most of the Brāhmīns officiated as priests during festivals and ceremonies.

"The Brāhmīn priests were very despicable men. They have always much money and are insolent that even using blown the guards of the door cannot hold them in check."71

R. Satyanātha Ayyar observes:

"The Brāhmīn enjoyed special privileges and was highly venerated and his time-honoured prestige did not suffer in the least. The caste system was carried sacrosanct and there were occasions of royal interference to check breaches of the rules."72

While the Nāyaks of Madurai extended all facilities for the education of the Brāhmīns, no effort was taken to do so for other communities. It is evident from different chronicles that the religious fervour of the Nāyaks and the Marātha rulers was cleverly utilised by the Brāhmīns to their best advantage. The rulers, the Brāhmīns anı
the caste Hindus did all they could to keep down the Depressed Classes in despondency without even a modicum of human consideration.

After the downfall of the Hindu Wodeyar kings of Mysore, Hyder Ali and his son Tippu Sultan held sway over the area and terrorised the South. These invaders were so ruthless that nothing escaped their ravaging eyes.

"Mussalman invaders always struck terror to the hearts of the people, as they destroyed harvests, burnt villages and enslaved people. Nobles would immolate their wives and children, then pierce themselves in their houses with their own swords, while families would burn themselves in their houses."73

The Muslim invaders and the Nawabs of Arcot and the Carnatic were responsible for large-scale conversion of the Depressed Classes into Islam. Even after conversion these unfortunate people were occupying lowly positions only. Thus, the Depressed Classes had a long record of servitude and suffering for no fault of theirs. Many a ruler came and went, but the lot of the Depressed Classes remained unchanged.
The advent of British rule in India, "led to the transformation of the economic anatomy of the Indian society but also of its social physiognomy." The general process of change was due to the disintegration of the social system based on group or corporate relations of status, the decline of occupational specialities, increasing use of money, growth of factionalism, changes in the inter-dependence of castes and a tendency for the Depressed Classes to find common cause in economic and political interests; the double process of Sanskritisation and Westernisation. The British came with a casteless culture and a literature full of thoughts on individual liberty. Caste was not regarded by the British Government as a unit empowered to administer justice. The problem of caste was not given much consideration by the British rulers. The British influence affected, to a great extent, Hindu traditionalism. An important section of highly educated Indians abandoned their traditional Hindu thought and feeling and adopted a Western outlook of life and philosophy. Macaulay's aim of creating a class of persons who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and in intellect" was realised.
The British Government pursued a policy of non-interference in social and religious matters. As a consequence, the Depressed Classes were denied the privilege of education which continued to be the monopoly of the upper classes. For the first time in the history of India, the people were legally united on a democratic basis by the British. New legislations were introduced by the rulers with a new social outlook. Yet, the Depressed Classes were denied many civil rights. In course of time, the British rulers were seized of the need to remove the disabilities of the Depressed Classes. The Government, through its Press Note of 1858 declared:

"All schools maintained at the sole cost of Government shall be open to all classes of its subjects without distinction."

A Press Note of 1915 regretted that the impact of Western civilization and English education had failed to combat the evil of untouchability. The Madras Legislative Council passed a Bill in 1925 throwing open public utilities to all classes of people, including the Depressed Classes. It was only after the Montford Reforms that the Depressed Classes received representation by nomination in local and legislative bodies. The first beneficiaries of English education were the
Brāhmīns and other high castes. As a result, the services under the Government were completely manned by the Brāhmīns and other high castes. Access to Government jobs was totally denied to the Depressed Classes. When they were permitted to enter the services under the Government, they did so in the lower levels only. This was mainly due to the attitude of the caste Hindus and Brāhmīns who occupied all the higher positions.

It must be conceded that the attitude of the administrators was not favourable to the Depressed Classes. Government did not want to antagonise the upper classes by educating the Depressed Classes and by extending other rights to them.

**Conclusion:**

The Caṅkam age, about which data is available in the anthologies of the period had well-marked social distinctions in its society. Though different castes were known by their respective professions or occupations, there is no literary proof which points to the existence of segregation or untouchability during this period.
There is evidence to support the view that social stratification on rigid caste lines took place during the post-Caṅkam period. It is towards the end of the post-Caṅkam period that we come across literary evidence which points to the emergence of untouchability as a consequence of the influence of Dharmasastras. The contribution of Brāhmanical Hinduism for the emergence of untouchability is seen during the Medieval period. This view too is based on inferences only and not on the basis of any conclusive proof.

The hostile attitude shown by the Saivite and Vaishnavite saints to caste distinctions, especially to untouchability, serves as an indicator of the fact that untouchability was not a native innovation but was thrust upon the Tamil society by socio-religious pressures which came from without. The views of the Siddhas go to support this. The emergence of the Vasaṅgai and Idāṅgai factions went a step further in increasing animosities based on caste distinctions.

There is evidence to support the view that both the Muslim and British rulers who ruled over parts of the
Tamil region in the modern period were not enthusiastic in setting matters right as far as caste distinctions and untouchability were concerned. It has been noted that the lower class people suffered much under the Nayak rulers. From the foregoing, it may be concluded that segregation and untouchability were introduced into the Tamil region in the latter half of the post-Caṅkam period and as years went by the distinctions and disabilities grew in vehemence.
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