



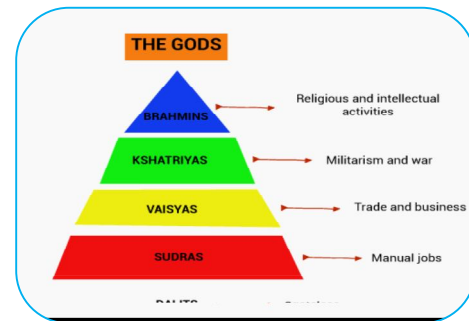
SOCIAL SETTING IN THE TAMIL REGION OF THE TEWNTIETH CENTURY

Dr. G. Rengaraju

Assistant Professor of History, R.V. Government Arts College,
Chengapattu, Tamil Nadu.

ABSTRACT -

The Tamil society in the beginning of the Twentieth Century was polarised in many ways. It marked with social degradation, caste segregation, economic disparities and religious anomalies. Based upon Varna system the Aryans divided the society into four classes viz., the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaisyas and the Sudras. With the advent of the Aryans into south India, the existing indigenous divisions and subdivisions based upon occupation of the society came to be amalgamated with these four fold divisions. However this Aryan system did not completely surpass the existing class structure in the Tamil Region.



KEY WORDS- Brahmins, Vellalals, non-Brahmins, Caste Hindus, Depressed Classes, Adi-Dravidas.

ASCENDANCY OF THE BRAHMINS

As years went on, the four fold system which mingled with the social divisions of the Tamils and there emerged three primary divisions viz., the Brahmins, the caste - Hindus and the depressed classes.¹ The Brahmins who were in top part of the social structure gained an eminent position in the Tamil society. The Brahmins were only 3.3 per cent of the Tamil population and resided at the place known as *agraharam*. By nature, they were highly orthodox and kept their superiority in major domains. They were divided into a number of endogamous groups and were not evenly settled down in Tamil Country. Nearly half of the Tamil Brahmins lived in the three districts of Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli and Tirunelveli. Thanjavur was considered to be the stronghold of Brahmin community. About nine per cent of the total population of Thanjavur were Brahmins.² In Tamil Country there were two broad categories of Brahmins namely, Iyers and Iyengars, and among the occupational Tamil Brahmins there were the Vedic Brahmins, domestic Brahmins and temple priests. The temple priests played a remarkable role in the society. They regulated religious life and mingled with the people in the day to day public and religious activities.³

The reorganization of the administrative system in the second half of the Nineteenth Century gave a lot of opportunities to the Brahmins to improve their status. They became elite and administrative groups of the Tamil society. Due to their economic status and political influence they acquired landed property.⁴ In course of time, they occupied a dominant and privileged position in the social setup. They led a luxurious and convenient life at home while the other caste people were tilling the soil or engaging in trade activities. The Brahmins gave their lands to the non- Brahmins tenants for

lease and they also cultivated the lands with the help of the labourers.⁵ Thus the Brahmins gained permanent source of income from the landed property and temple assets.

As the Brahmins were in higher position in the society, they were able to provide all kinds of education to their children. Because of their education, they were able to secure postings in the British administrative set up, and they moved towns seeking all facilities.⁶ As they were considered an elite class, they involved in the political spheres and highly influenced the masses. They dominated all the socio-political and religious activities and were solely responsible for the aggravation of the caste system in Tamil Region.⁷ The growth of Non-Brahmin Movement compelled the Brahmins to seek new avenues to secure their position in politics and administration.

EMERGENCE OF THE NON-BRAHMIN

The caste-Hindus secured next position to the Brahmins in the social strata. Among them, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettiars, Naidus, Naicks and Kammalas gained great influence over the society.⁸ They were called non-Brahmin caste-Hindus. The Vellala was highly respected and dominant caste group among the non-Brahmin caste-Hindus. There are several categories of the Vellalas, such as Tondaimandalam Vellalas (Saiva Vellalas), Karkarta Vellalas, Nanchinadu Vellalas, Kongu Vellalas etc. Mostly they were land owners and cultivators.

Mudaliars are another example of the Indian penchant for diversity in unity. There are the Arcot Mudaliars, Vellore Mudaliars, Poonamalle Mudaliars and Senguntha Mudaliars. They were all grouped under the generic name of Vellalar at one time or another. In Tamil Country, Vellalar was the common name for people who engaged in agriculture. They were next to Brahmins in hierarchical terms. The Arcot Mudaliars distinguished themselves in education and generally in Anglophilia. It was a location (Vellore) or occupation (Senguntha-Silk weaving) that made for sub-divisions in course of time.

'Vellala' the word in Tamil denotes 'cultivator'. Simultaneously it also denotes a major caste spread out in all the areas of the Tamil country i.e., Tondaimandalam, Chola Mandalam, Kongu Mandalam and Pandya Mandalam and subdivided on that territorial basis, and then further divided into numerous sub-castes.

The Vellalas played a foremost role in various periods at various levels.⁹ They were landed class, keeping large tracts of cultivable land. The Saiva Vellalas known for vegetarianism occupied a decent place in the society. They had good education and entered the government jobs in various categories. Besides they engaged in ploughing operation which fetched them a considerable income from agriculture and increased their economic and social status on par with the Brahmins.¹⁰ They established their individuality and identity in their social ceremonies by not inviting the Brahmins, the usual practice of other caste people. The other Vellalas lived throughout Tamil Country but they were not maintaining the status equal that of Saiva Vellalas in the society.¹¹

The Chettiars or Chettis next to the Vellala caste, involved in trade and commercial activities. There were numerous sub-divisions among them of them, the most significant and influential groups were Nattukottai Chettis, Beri Chettis, Komatti Chettis and Vaniya Chettis.¹²

The artisan castes were a homogenous group constituting not less than one tenth of the total population.¹³ They were called as Kammalas and Viswakarmas, supposed to be descended from Viswakarma, the architect among gods. They believe that they are even superior to Brahmins. They also call themselves as Acharis and Pattars and they claim a knowledge of the Vedas.¹⁴ The Kammalas are well organized and practiced vegetarian foods. The five divisions among them are goldsmith (*tattan*), brassmith (*kannan*), carpenter (*tachchan*), stonemason (*kal tachchan*) and blacksmith (*kollan* or *karuman*). They are called *panchalar*.¹⁵ The goldsmiths are not having the practice of intermarriage with the kollan or karuman where as the rest of others are doing. They wear the holy thread and call themselves as Vishwa Brahmins. They maintain a higher place in the social scale but they scattered throughout the Tamil Nadu in meager strength and their services are highly indispensable and useful to the society.

Thus the non – Brahmin caste – Hindu community rendered a significant role not only in the agrarian activities but also in commercial and artisan works. In fact there are a lot of socio economic disparities within each; but they sunk their differences when they began to resist the monopoly of Brahmins in all spheres.¹⁶ The non – Brahmin caste – Hindus were numerically strong than the Brahmins but lagged behind Brahmins in the race for prosperity, power, and wealth. In 1871 it was also proved in the Census Report that the government jobs were monopolised by the Brahmins.¹⁷ Further it was noted that no non – Brahmin caste – Hindu was elected to the Legislative Council of Madras from 1882 to 1917.¹⁸

Among the non-Brahmins in general the backward were the Nadars, Vanniars, Thevars etc., and they enjoyed better status and privileges than the Adi-Dravidas. The Nadars, settled excessively in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari, Madurai and Ramand districts.¹⁹ They considered as inferior to other backward class people. Their main occupation was today drawing, Palmyra cultivation and sale of the goods produced from the Palmyra tree.²⁰

Next to Nadars of the backward class of Tamil Region the Kallars, the Maravas and the Agamudiyars collectively known as ‘Thevars and ‘Mukkulathors’ belonged to a warrior group.²¹ The names of the three communities K.M.A reflect occupational characteristics Kallars are professional deviants robbers; Maravars are warriors and soldiers and Agamudiyars are largely cultivating castes.²²

The Maravas were either soldiers in the *Poligar's* armies or *Kavalkars* (watch and ward) in both *sircar* and Zamin. They were in control of the judicial administration too. This responsibility was particularly with the Maravas in the southern districts of Ramnad, Tirunelveli and Madurai and with the Kallars in the areas North of Madurai and south of Tiruchirappalli.²³

The Vanniars, were the lowest caste in the lowest Varna. They settled mostly in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, and in Pondicherry. Vanniyar is a generic name for a large number of castes. They formed twenty-one per cent in Chengleput, twenty-six per cent in North Arcot, thirty-three per cent in South Arcot, nine per cent in Tiruchirappalli and twenty-four per cent in Salem.²⁴ A Tamil proverb has it that Palli Matures into Padayachi, Padyachi into Goundan and Goundan into Naicken. However, in their attempts at caste mobility they forged a common identity and formed a horizontal stretch.

Depressed Classes

The Depressed class people occupied the lowest rank in the social ladder. They were labourers in agriculture and other public works.²⁵ They were called by different names as panchamas, untouchables, Adi-Dravidas and the Fifth Varna. Since 1922 they have been officially called Adi-Dravidas. In 1933 Gandhi called them as ‘Harijan’s.²⁶ The term ‘Scheduled Caste’ was first used by the Simon Commission.²⁷ They were so called partly because of racial, partly of religious and partly as matter of custom.²⁸

The Adi-Dravidas consisted of nine endogamous castes known as Koravas, Chakkiliyas, Kuluvas, Valluvas, Mudigas, Malas, Pallas, Parayas and Semmas. Numerically they were around 86,00,000²⁹ and formed one fifth of the total population of the Madras Presidency. They inhabited is all the districts of Tamil Country. Among them the Pallas³⁰ and Paraiahs were notable labourers resided in every village. The Pallars constitute 21 per cent of the Dalit population in Tamil Country, while the other groups such as Parayas and Chakiliyas account for 59 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.³¹ The Pallars are ‘Mountain People’ who settled in Plains. David Ludden remarked that the primitive Pallar cultivators preferred – fed subservient status in irrigated villages to their precarious independence in the hills or Plains.³² S.R.Lushington, the first collector of Tirunelveli found them enterprising and noted their anxiety in getting early emancipation: “Despite the scanty means of subsistence, the Pallars in their eagerness to obtain relief from affliction in bondage, usually contracted their wants to the mere preservation of their lives with an exception that the accumulation of their savings might enable them to purchase freedom at not a distant future.”³³

The life of depressed class was one of ignorance, misery and servitude. The daily life and living conditions of the depressed classes were extremely pathetic. The Cheri or slum, the living place of the

depressed class was at outskirts a considerable distance from the habitation places of the upper castes and it did not have even the basic facilities and amenities.³⁴ Like aborigines and animals they led their lives under unhygienic conditions.

The Depressed Class people were not accessed to the public tanks, wells and roads. They had to draw drinking water from stinking muddy unhygienic pools. They were not permitted to oil or comb their hair. The village barbers services were denied to depressed classes. They had to dress themselves only in rags. They were prohibited from Christening their children with names commonly used by the higher castes. They were forbidden to take up any profession or occupation other than scavenging and other menial tasks.³⁵

The principle of untouchability was carried too far in the observance of what was known as distance pollution. J.H.Hutton observed that several caste-Hindus were regarded as polluted by the proximity of the members of the depressed classes and so were not allowed to approach Hindu temples. Among the caste-Hindus, the Brahmins, who belonged to the priestly class were permitted to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The people belonging to the next lower rung viz., Vellalas, Mudaliars and others were allowed to approach the steps in front of the *garbhagraham* for devotional acts like reciting Vedic mantras and prostrating in front of the deities. When the deity was in procession during the *brahmotsava* (the grand annual festival) they were asked to stand 100 cubits away from the idol of the deity. Violations were considered to be ominous. To ward off such an evil fresh consecration was required for purification.³⁶

Thus the ranking of the various castes had divine sanction even in the temple. From there, it was also practiced in the social mobility and movements of the people. The Nadars were considered to contaminate a Brahmin if they approached the latter within twenty-four paces, a Tiyan within thirty-six paces and pulayan within ninety-six paces.³⁷ C.A.Innes and K.Madhava Menon have observed that artisans must keep a distance of twenty-four feet from a Brahmin while a 'Nayadi' must keep seventy-four feet away. In some cases this distance shrank to about four or five feet. In some other cases mere sight was enough to cause pollution. Thus the pollution concepts-purity and distance caused untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability.³⁸

The European Christian missionaries laid the foundation for the enhancement of the depressed people. Though they were interested in evangelization of the religion, they attacked the superstitions beliefs and the caste atrocities of those days and created a new awareness among the outcaste groups. The issue of caste exclusiveness raised by them caught the imagination of 'Polluting Castes' of South Tamil Nadu. The Pallars began to convert to Christianity, which promised self-respect to all outcastes in Tamil society. Successive famines that broke out in Tamil Region from 1876 also drove the Pallars, as an economically vulnerable group, into the fold of Christianity, as church only had organized famine relief camps and charity homes to feed the hungry then. The Pallars invariably took to Catholicism or Lutheranism as these two denominations particularly empathized with the subaltern groups.³⁹

To conclude, the social formation in Tamil Region in the early Twentieth Century also shaped the political developments and it worked out for the powerful emergence of the Non-Brahmin Movement, formation of the Justice Party and Justice Ministry against the preponderance of the Brahmins in all the spheres of the public activities. In the passage of the non-Brahmins were responsible for the emergence of the Dravidian Movement which in the long run ensured Social Justice in educational sector and job sector. It assures malice towards none. All for all is the motto, in which the Depressed Classes and Backward Classes got elevation.

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Dr. G.Rengaraju

**Assistant Professor of History, R.V. Government Arts College, Chengapattu,
Tamil Nadu.**