



ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF CASTE SYSTEM IN TAMIL NADU

Mrs. K. Ragu Jegadeeswari¹ and Dr. S. Kanagammal²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Department of History, Tirunelveli.

² Associate Professor in History , Sri. Parasakthi College for Women , Courtallam.

ABSTRACT

A study of Origin and Evolution of Caste system in Tamil Nadu is an attempt to trace out the meaning and definition and changes in the Caste system through the ages. Generally, India is a land of several religions, races, and inequalities. Society in the Indian sub-continent has been segmented into several religions and caste groups. Majority of the people belongs to the Hindu religion in India. The Hindu society is a composite and comprises several castes and sub-castes. These castes are not horizontal divisions of the society. Castes occupy various levels in the ladder of Hindu social hierarchy.

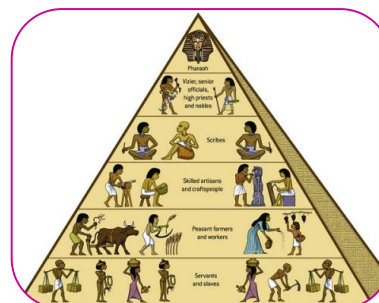
A man had no individual identity in the past. Only caste rights and caste privileges were recognized and maintained through the ages. These castes were considered as prime part of units of the society people enjoyed varying status and rights. The social inequality was believed as divinely ordained. However, this system had to have faced a lot of challenges from time to time. Whenever the challenges happened to appear, the Hindu society and the system followed so far underwent some modifications to suit the need of the society. Of course, the hierarchical system of the society was never given up by the caste Hindus. Several social reformers, leaders, and administrators have tried to eradicate the social inequalities but it has been continuing with slight modifications and these efforts have been taken up ever since the period of Gautama Buddha. Under the British, several measures were introduced by the Government to bring about a change in the social condition of Tamil Nadu. However, it could not be successful because people had a difference of opinion among themselves.

KEYWORDS: Caste; Hindu; India; Society; Tamil Nadu.

INTRODUCTION

A study of **Origin and Evolution of Caste system in Tamil Nadu** is an attempt to trace out the Meaning and Definition and Changes in the Caste system through the ages. Generally India is a land of several religions, races, and inequalities. Society in the Indian sub-continent has been segmented into several religions and caste groups. Majority of the people belongs to the Hindu religion in India. The Hindu society is a composite and comprises several castes and sub-castes. These castes are not horizontal divisions of the society. Castes occupy various levels in the ladder of Hindu social hierarchy.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research work of the study is brought out on the basis of facts culled out from the primary and secondary sources. A number of interviews conducted with many age-old persons who are aware of various facts in connection to the function of the caste system. List of castes published by the government of Tamil Nadu for various purposes such as educational scholarship appointment in government job based on the census of India (Madras Census), Bombay Census Report 1913, and an article from the journal 'The Indian Social Reformer' is referred. L.S.O. Malley's Indian Caste system, K.K.Pillay's 'The caste system in Tamil Nadu'.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The followings are the objectives of the study

- To define the meaning of Caste by the viewers and their theories evolved different ideas.
- To study the Origin and Development of the Caste and difference between the Caste, Class, Varna, Race, and Tribe.
- To evaluate the changes in Caste system periodically and narrate the rich Heritage of tradition and culture of Tamils.
- To impart the knowledge of Governmental Schemes and measures for the upliftment of Indian society.

RESEARCH FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Meaning of caste

The term **caste** derived from the Portuguese word "**Casta**", means breed, race, group¹. French used this term to indicate as a breed. It is obvious and evident that an individual group, created for particular and specific reasons, due to their separate identity or occupations or a particular way of life which is generally called a **caste** in India. This distinctive caste division causes fractions, separatism, and group among the people in society.

In India, i.e., **Bharat**, the land of the ruler Bharatha, during the ancient period, caste was called by the name **Varna**. The **Chaturvarna** system (four-fold system of caste) which included the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras caused divisions and disparities among all the people on the basis of their routine occupations. Every one of them had their own individual forms and ways of life. This occupational division and groups among the people served as the basic foundation for the emergence of the caste system, which was fully supported by the different colours (**Varna**) of the skin of men.

Tamil country, the southernmost part of peninsular India, had its own faith and belief over the well knitted social set up, which was actually based on certain custom-oriented. The culture of the Tamil country, along with its individuality, has its specific and unique feature called "**caste**", which increased in number gradually due to the arrival of variations in occupations, place, and ways of life.

The term **Jati** means caste according to India. The term **Jati** is based on the birth or descent². All the members of a particular **Jati** claim their common origin and practice of a traditional routine occupation. Adoption of the particular traditional occupation was a particular trait of a specific set of people belonging to an individual community of homogeneous nature. All those people formed into different separate groups which obtained the name caste. E.A. Gart and Sir Herbert Risely have acknowledged and approved the above fact. Caste is based on a social class having a social stratification, traditional occupation, preoccupied

rules and regulations with upward and progressive mobility. Caste, an endogamous social institution, has its own individual social, religious, economic and political traits.

The caste system prevalent in India is to make divisions and fractions among different Indian people. It plays a significant role which is not in practice in other countries. It is a unique and individual social system prevailing only in India particularly based on birth with specific restrictions pertaining to marriage, food and social intercourse. The caste offers wide scope for every individual to act as a unique person among the people of the area where they live. So the caste system is another significant feature in creating and promoting fractions and divisions among Indians which enables them to strengthen their own individual highness. Amidst its role as a means for creating a schism, it is not all removed in India.

Definition of Caste

The word '**Caste**' comes from the Portuguese word '**caste**' signifying 'Breed', Race or Class. According to this origin, the word caste signifies a hereditary link with a family origin³. According to E. A. Gait caste may be defined as, "An endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common name having some traditional occupation claiming descent from the same source and commonly regarded as forming a single homogeneous community".

Another Historian Sir Herbet Risely defines caste is a "collection of families bearing a common name claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor human or divine. Professing to follow the same hereditary calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community."

Some other Scholars like Sir. Herbert Risley, G.S. Ghurye and R.C. Majumdar are of the opinion that caste system came up mainly because of the commingling and unification of many migrated groups of people with the natives. It caused the origin and emergence of the caste system⁴. Scholars like J.H. Hutton never accepted this theory because race and occupation alone cannot be considered as the actual original cause for the arrival and outcome of the caste system. So along with the above mentioned, multifaceted factors, including the common things would have been the reason for the introduction of the different castes. Further, the caste disparity or distinction is a permeated unique custom and tradition available only in the Indian subcontinent, which met with the arrival of many emigrants into the country for various economic, commercial and political reasons. On that line, this also may be accepted that, after the formation of caste groups by their personal identities, physical nature and occupation. Caste system gained value importance and a solid ground and that allowed the castes to spread widely in all parts of India. Though castes caused distinctions, disparities, and faction among people their origin should have been a common one. Specific common causes would have yielded ample opportunities for the arrival of different castes. Thus it is evident that the caste system in India is the outcome of the common native activities and traditions.

Caste System in Tamil Nadu

The caste system, which caused divisions and factions in contemporary society, was prevalent in Tamil Nadu even during the **Sangam** age. Much authentic information on the social condition of the Sangam Age can be gathered from the Sangam Literatures⁵. The following topics may be studied in this chapter.

- (i) Fivefold physiographical divisions
- (ii) The Caste system
- (iii) The social life of the people
- (iv) Position of women

The people of the Sangam age led calm life according to their regular occupations. The people had different modes of living and occupations owing to the topographical division of their lands called **Tinai**s. They are called **Kurinji**, **Mullai**, **Marudam**, **Neithal**, and **Palai**. Hunters lived in the **Kurinji** region, shepherds

in the **Mullai**, peasants in the **Marudam**, fishermen in the **Neithal** and robbery in the **Palai** region⁶. Their habits and customs; professions and duties: beliefs and worship differed from one region to another: yet they were dependent in one way or other. A clear picture of each region may be studied here.

The system of caste was based on traditional occupations. For instance those who were engaged in beating the drum (**Parai**) were called **Paraiyar** and in the same way who sang songs were called **Paduvor** and that executed **Kuthu** were **Kuthar** or **Kuthiyar** Tolkappiyar, the grammarian and author of **Tolkappiyam** too has divided the Tamil people on the basis of their own individual occupations, duties, and privileges. The sudras were employed by the rulers for handling weapons of varied types. They were called by many names such as **Maravar**, **Kuravar**, **Ayar**, **Ulavar**, and **Paradavar** on the basis of land tracts such as **Kurinji**, **Mullai**, **Marudam**, **Neidhal**, and **Palai**. They were distinguished and stratified socially and occupations too determined the caste.

The caste system of that period was an occupational traditional and hereditary one. Aryanism did not allow the Tamils to follow the caste traditions adopted by the alien intruders. The Tamils, due to their individual customs and traditions, were unwilling to accept the Aryan form of caste divisions. The Tamil rulers patronized the Brahmins by offering and donating various things such as wealth and lands needed for them. The emigrant Brahmins too were assigned an exalted and envious position in the society. But the hereditary caste system also continued to survive and the disparities among caste groups also were prevalent. Because caste disparities are the age-old customary and unavoidable practices and none can skip the existing traditions. Further, as they carry on their life of hereditary nature due to the income from their occupations, they never overlook it or deviating from it. The Brahmins widely adopted the system of pollution and it became a deep-rooted custom during the time of the greater Pallava ruler Mahendravarman II (668 - 670 A.D). Though the castes differed from customary practices, various occupations also determined the caste system. The castes were not at all uniform and they also varied in nature the basis of regional differences such as **Kurinji**, **Mullai**, **Marudam**, **Neidal**, and **Palai** but occasionally the people's occupations too met with changes. It was mainly because of the changes which existed in the traits and qualities of the individuals or groups of people. The qualities and occupations are also distinguished and differentiated the people those who were engaged in similar occupations formed individual groups separately. Anyhow, factions and divisions were in common.

The different kinds of people called **Mallan**, **Panan**, **Kuttan**, **Kadamban**, **Tudiyar**, **Parayan** and **Pulayan** formed the sub-castes which emerged in the Tamil country on the basis of occupations. It is also evident from Purananuru that the Tamils of the early **Sangam** period were aware of the Aryan system of caste traditions and hierarchy. The Brahmins, who were well versed in Vedas, and learned scholars and orthodox people executed all their religious as well as ceremonial rites and rituals scrupulously. They were employed by the Tamil rulers as messengers. **Purananuru** further reveals that there were four divisions of people called **Tudiyar**, **Panar**, **Paraiyar**, and **Kadambar**. The Tamil epics **Cilappatikaram** of Elangovadigal and **Manimegalai** of SeethalaiSathanar also contain details about groups of people called **Kshatriyas**, **Vaisyas**, and **Vellalar**. There prevailed untouchability and disparities among them. All of them maintained their own individualism in the day to day life and activities. The Aryans introduced the **varnashramadharma** into the Tamil country after their penetration into the Tamil land. Even Mahendravarman II (668-670), the Pallava ruler, stressed the importance, essential need, and preservation of the caste system.

Caste is playing its role in all the spheres of the social life of the Tamils. Further, during the Pallava period, there were a specific set of people involved in different types of occupations. Those who constructed buildings were called **TattaliKottuwar**. Likewise, the **Uvaiccan** was a drummer. The **Devaradiyars** or **Devadasis**, also known as **Adigalmar** were associated and attached with the temples as dancers. The Uttiramerur inscription of Parantaka I (907-953 A.D.) informs that **Agambadiyar** were people associated with agriculture and agrarian pursuits. The **Idayar** were cattle breeders. Thus it is clear that the caste system was based on occupations during the **Sangam** period as well as in the subsequent Pallava periods. The **Chetties** were people of business and mercantile communities. They were known as **Nagarthar**, **Nattukottai Chetty**, **BeriChetty**, **Kasukkara Chetties**, **Komuttichetty**, and **KudiraiChetty**. They reveal that

every caste had its own individual branches and subdivisions. Caste system thus became a widened and expanded one in a thickened form in the Tamil country and the Tamils without any aversion and opposition acknowledged and adopted them without knowing the consequences of the factions among them. They were unable to understand that the caste system had divided them into groups.

The Kallars were the other powerful set of people in the southern regions of Tamil Nadu i.e., in the Chola and Pandya regions. They were closely associated with the modern **Maravarand Agamudayar**. They were not regular soldiers employed in an organized army. But they were only **bandits**. When the monarchies gained prominence politically the position of the Kallars also began to change. The **Kallars** formed a separate group of people, who indulged in theft and highway robbery. So the caste system occupied a unique place in the Tamil society and caused factions and divisions among the people based on economic considerations and disparities.

Changes in Caste System during the Modern period

Caste is a permanent and unavoidable feature in the Tamil society it has to alter its activities according to the transitions and changes which were introduced every now and then in the society by various ways and means⁷. The centralization and adoption of uniform and co-ordinated system of administration in the Indian subcontinent during the mighty alien colonial period had its own impacts over the native traditional caste system. The growth of education, judicial pursuits, and economic institutions have actually crippled the caste system, caste policies as well as their councils. With the installation of the British rule in the Madras presidency, with the commencement of the 19th century, many changes gradually crept into the social, political, economic and cultural phases of the then Tamil country. Since the westerners were for the adoption of uniform and codified systems in all aspects, the castes too offered significance to their own caste **Panchayats** or councils, which were mostly autonomous institutions and had greater influence over the entire people of the caste. Actually, no endeavors were made to set aside caste system because it was a deeply permeated social tradition.

The social reformers in improving the general social condition of the poor played vital and a venerable role. In 1859 itself the Shanar women of the South of peninsular India were allowed to wear Jackets to cover their breast. In 1923 the Government of Madras announced that no grants will be issued to schools or educational institutions which refused to admit children of backward and depressed classes. Promotion through education was utilized as a means to avoid ignorance. For enriching the condition of depressed class in 1923 itself the Village Magistrates were empowered to punish those who opposed the uplift of the downtrodden. In 1925 the Government of Madras enabled all the people of all the communities to utilize all the public facilities entrusted by the Government without any deviation. In 1930-31 the Madras government maintained public streets, markets, and tanks by the Corporation Fund for the welfare and benefit of the people of all classes and communities.

The caste system caused drastic changes in different fields of society. The services of the caste system are mostly harmful to society because it hinders peace and tranquillity and causes schisms and divisions. The caste system changed or modified religious attitudes, observances, and traditions. The attitudes and outlooks of the people fixed the caste rules and activities⁸. For achieving social recognition and position the members were prepared to give up their age-old customs and acknowledged the changes on the basis of modernism. So these individuals, national, political and social views were altered and modified. They started moving with the running current for the progress of the society. So caste system became a stabilizer of the social, economic, political and religious spheres.

CONCLUSION

From an analysis of the origin and evolution of the caste system in Tamil Nadu in the preceding pages, it is noted that caste, the unique system prevailing in India, is having its own indigenous origin. The multiplied number of castes is due to their origin from their multifarious occupations. The Tamil society, actually a caste-oriented one, had its caste system based on the **Varna** system. On the basis of occupation,

various castes subsequently emerged. Each and every group had its own individual traits and qualities. The emigrants to the Tamil country from one region to other regions too formed separate groups and castes in their migrated areas. It is obvious that the conservative minded and tradition-oriented Tamils were unwilling to part with their old values and traditions and they took it as an insult to deviate from the customary practices of any nature.

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Ph.D. Research Scholar, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Department of History, Tirunelveli.