



## THE DEVELOPMENT OF CASTE ORGANISATION IN THE AGRARIAN SOCIETY OF TAMIL NADU

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### ABSTRACT :

One of the most obvious features of political modernisation in south India has been the emergence of the politics of the caste association. From the later nineteenth century, the provincial political arena became crowded with organisations, claiming to represent the interests of caste groups, and appeals to caste solidarity became established in the vocabulary of modern, politics. From that time onwards, caste political activity has grown in size and scope and has deeply coloured Tamil Nadu political history. This essay attempts to examine some of the reasons for this development.

**KEYWORDS :** political modernization , interests of caste groups , vocabulary of modern.

### INTRODUCTION

This essay is intended as a contribution to history, not to social Anthropology, and it is not concerned with the 'inner meaning' of the caste system.<sup>1</sup> It proceeds from the notion that there were several systems of caste relationship present in south India at the same time, and that each was conditioned by the social context in which it was operating. Its main purpose is to examine these social contexts in order to see why, at or about the same time, caste communities which were radically dissimilar in their practical organisations all began to act in the same way, that is, to form caste associations and to develop their horizontal caste connections. Particularly in the agrarian society of Tamil Nadu.<sup>2</sup>

### CASTE IN AGRARIAN SOCIETY

The difficulties encountered in examining and seeking to explain the development of associations among castes like the Kammalas, however, are nothing compared to those which arise when we turn to the land. In Tamil Nadu, nearly seventy per cent of the population lived directly off agriculture and the problems of agrarian economic and rural political organisation were infinitely the most important in society. Yet the way that they were solved owed practically nothing to the institutions and organisations of caste. To take the economy first: with the exception of a few pockets of rice cultivation, most of the agricultural land in the Presidency was under poor quality dry crops.<sup>3</sup> There was little scope for the growth of a heavy volume of



trade and most villages, or circles of villages, farmed largely for subsistence. These small rural localities tended to be dominated by a handful of rich peasants who held a high proportion of the land and who supplied vital credit facilities and extra employment for the majority of their neighbours who did not hold sufficient land for subsistence. While the construction of the railways stimulated the grain trade and promoted cash cropping, particularly in cotton and groundnut, it

did little to alter the lot of most villagers. They remained debt-bound and locked inside a village economy. The rich peasant formed the connection between lower and higher markets and took most of the profits. To some extent he was-pulled out of his village environment, but only if he was very rich was it possible for him to penetrate deeply into the superior markets and become involved in sophisticated financial organisations. In most cases he sold his collected produce at the market and went home again.<sup>4</sup>

In this type of economy, social relations were turned in on the small rural locality and there was no need for extensive organisations of any kind. The rich peasant controlled his debt, employment and obedience networks through personal contacts with dependents in a face-to-face society, and could himself see that his carts reached the market towns.<sup>5</sup> Equally, intensive protective organisations had little purpose. In the agrarian economy there were few specialised skills. While economic stratification split one 'family from another within the same caste, and while there were many different castes involved in the same agricultural processes, the lines, of economic organisation favoured the development of the cross-caste network, tying men of several castes to a rich peasant leader. This leader performed for his variegated dependents the functions which, conceptually at least, might have been performed by caste institutions—and he kept them apart. Moreover, in the situation of economic stability which characterised the period; there was little pressure on peasant leaders to form larger combinations, and they tended to treat each other as rivals. The co-marketing brotherhood, so often, found in northern India, was hardly known in the south. Obviously, then, the scope for caste and kinship to play a part in economic organisation was limited. Indeed, it is difficult to attribute to them any significant role: a Reddi or a Gounder landlord might or might not employ Reddi or Gounder labourers and tenants. The nature of the economy emphasised 'socially vertical' connections and rendered broader 'socially horizontal' ties of caste irrelevant.<sup>6</sup>

The governmental system, like the economic, stressed vertical social connections within small territories. Rural power derived from the ability of a few villagers to enforce the obedience of their neighbours through the application of credit, employment and revenue sanctions and of unchecked physical force. The influence of rural leaders cut across the lines of caste and were-logically independent of kinship. The resources they deployed could only be gathered from and used in the context of immediate, face-to-face relations. In the organisation of power, connections with other districts, other taluks, sometimes even the village next door, were irrelevant. Political relations outside 'the little kingdom' were confined to making war and alliances, in the manner of diplomacy.<sup>7</sup> They did not lead to the creation of a higher political organisation because the roots of power lay in local village control, which they could scarcely affect.

Under the pressures imposed by economic and administrative-organisation the formal institutions of ritual and communal life, which, played such a large part in keeping together trading and service groups, were declining in importance or had ceased to exist among agricultural castes. With the exception of groups like the Gounders of Coimbatore, who preserved a vestigial clan structure from their settlement pattern, and others like the Kallars who had only recently transferred from criminal to agricultural pursuits, caste panchayats among dominant peasant castes were dead by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> And even among Gounders and settled Kallars, their functions were loose and their authority dependent on support from individual magnates. Further, among peasant groups religion was organized only at the level of the village, and few of them possessed maths or temples serving a wide locality. While members of the same caste or sub-caste might worship the same deity, there was no religious centre whose authority could bind them into a unit. Lacking panchayats and area temples, they had little tangible organisation as communities.<sup>9</sup>

The lack of rigidity and of systemisation in caste status can be seen in the way that socially mobile groups were able to change caste; Of course, this flexibility could be found everywhere else in India, but in Madras conditions mobility was both easier and quicker. On the land there were few institutional barriers, such as inter-marriage or membership of communal temples or organisations, which had to be bridged to win a new recognition. As Andre Beteille, saw in Thanjore:<sup>10</sup> 'Since intermarriage with close relatives is frequently practised by many Non-Brahmans, a section of people, by confining marital relations among themselves, can claim to be Vellalas, Ahamudiyans or Padaiyachis.' Once they had the power and

wealth to behave in the manner of their adopted group and had changed their customs to fit those of their new caste, there was little to prevent them from obtaining acceptance.<sup>11</sup>

The social and economic structure of Tamil Nadu at this time was not conducive to the development of broad caste confrontations. Unless there were strong institutional communications between local caste groups involved in status battles, it was unlikely that the status rivalry could be exported far outside the locality.<sup>12</sup> Nadar trading groups, of course, were well placed, to manage this extension, but their Maravar opponents were not. Maravars in the area of 'the six towns' of Ramnad district may have remained implacably hostile to Nadar assertions, but Maravars elsewhere could be less scrupulous. The Raja of Ramnad, the great Maravar lineage head in Tamil Nadu, had no hesitation in cementing a political alliance with the Nadars when it suited him. Moreover, the relative stability of the southern economy reduced the probability of major movements from below upsetting broad caste balances. Only those members of low-caste groups who had made wealth could sustain a claim to higher status, and their numbers were very few. By the 1920s, the Tiyya campaign in south Malabar had achieved no spectacular results; and after fifty years of propaganda, the Shanar campaign had not even convinced many poor Tinnevely Shanars of its worth: as H.R. Pate reported in 1917, 'It must not be supposed that the "Sanror" theory has by any means spread a general infection over the whole community.'<sup>13</sup> Similarly, twenty-three years after the foundation of their Vanniakula Kshatriya Sangham, the wealthy Pallis had convinced remarkably few of their depressed brethren to join their campaign. If caste associations among predominantly rural castes are to be made the product of extending 'natural' status rivalries, it becomes impossible to account for the amount of caste activity with which we are faced. By the 1920s, dozens, if not hundreds, of caste associations had been founded the press was saturated with, communal invective and politicians were speechifying on the role and importance of their communities. Yet the pressures to create caste confrontations, and the machinery to transport them to the mega-category level, were just not present.<sup>14</sup> An explanation of this kind must defy credibility.

In such a situation, of course, the notion of groups coming together as communities to fight for a common political cause becomes an absurdity. The operational category of politics was the faction in which members, drawn from different castes, were held by transactional ties to a leader, and by which castes were divided.<sup>15</sup> The most we could expect the factor of caste to be here would be a point of reference used by leaders to make alliances with each other against leaders of other castes. In contrast to trading and service groups, and even local Kamrnalas, the horizontal connection was not a fundamental principle of organisation. If we look beyond these limited ties for the development of regular and broad patterns of collaboration, which created solid caste blocks, we find that caste was far from being accepted as a normal basis of alliance. Indeed, in many ways, it cannot be seen as an independent basis at all.<sup>16</sup>

In a study of rural district politics in the 1920s, C.J. Baker has found that, leaving aside confrontations like that of the Nadars and Maravars which reflected a status clash, he could distinguish the emergence of wide caste parties, in only two districts and, in both cases, the caste party was determined less by considerations of ritual or status than by political tactics. In the first district, Guntur, the district board had passed into the hands of a Telaga merchant of Guntur town who ran it with a town clique composed of Brahmans and Kammalas.<sup>17</sup> He used the; patronage of the board to establish an ascendancy in district affairs and rode roughshod over the aspirations of rural politician who manned the subordinate taluk boards. A small, closely knit group development of caste organisation in south India of Kammala families in the north-east of the district, who exercised "great power in Bapatla taluk, felt his whiplash and were moved to revolt. As Kammalas were the dominant caste in most of the district and as they composed many of the 'out-factions' in the talukboards, the Bapatla families were able to wrap an essentially. rural/urban division in the flag of caste hostility and to raise a 'Kamma scare' in the district. They stood on a caste platform at district board and legislative council elections and ultimately took the district board presidentship." In the second district, Coimbatore, the landed and banking magnate V.C. Vellingiri Gounder tried to develop a caste constituency in the wake of the 1920 elections.<sup>18</sup> One of his men was killed in a toddy-shop brawl and many of his political opponents were involved in the toddy trade. He used the Non-co-operation liquor campaign

to destroy the wealth of his enemies and, by running a series of anti-drink conferences, he extended his hold over his neighbouring Gounder clansmen. Both cases, however, clearly depended on the caste factor coinciding with other, more politically relevant, factors.' And, in both cases, when the other factors ceased to exercise a hold, so did caste.<sup>19</sup> After winning the Guntur district board, the Kammala action group split into 'ins' and 'outs' and one segment began to organise anti-zamindari campaigns which hit Kammala zamindars. By the mid-1920s, when Vellingiri Gounder's political considerations had changed, the Gounder conference slipped; into obscurity. Even among Pallis the Vannikula Kshatriya' movement; appears to have had only a marginal influence on political conduct.<sup>20</sup> In the 1962 legislative council elections, the Padaiyachi caste association candidates were all beaten, although they stood in a district in which their caste had a large number of voters. The one Padaiyachi who was successful had nothing to do with the association. He was backed by magnates of various castes and stood on the Congress Swarajya Party ticket.<sup>24</sup>

It is, of course, a question of only theoretical significance whether, given different conditions, the 'old' institutions of caste could have adapted themselves to the new, broader political; environment of the twentieth century. At such a level of abstraction, almost anything might be said. What is clear from our study is that they did not. The growth of caste associations and of attempts at 'horizontal mobilisation' were undeniably important political developments.<sup>22</sup> They engaged the activities of large numbers of men, played a crucial role in the creation of vernacular journalism and have permanently coloured south Indian political rhetoric. Yet they cannot be explained adequately by reference to patterns of continuity and change in the 'traditional' institutions of the vast majority of castes. With the exception of trading and service groups, who were already locally organised, there was no firm basis for the transformation of socially vertical networks into the-wide "communities; In most cases, the caste of caste association propaganda of caste defined communities in constant competition and the caste of actual social organisation, were concepts remote from each other.<sup>23</sup> The only way of bringing them together, of following a line of continuous development between 'tradition' and 'modernity', would seem to be by carrying the English dictionary through the looking glass and supporting that, because the notion of caste can be found in both situations, it must mean the same in both.

In order to account for the emergence of communal politics in Tamil Nadu, it is necessary to go outside the existing social institutions of caste and to search for new political factors which produced a new political style.<sup>24</sup> Although the need for communal ties in most political situations was small; obviously there must have been groups who were beginning to require broader caste contacts or there could have been no caste associations. Their specific needs must have, arisen from changes in their local and personal circumstances, which forced them to regard caste in (for them) a new way and to build qualitatively new caste institutions. The key to the problem of communal politics lies, therefore, not in any social history of castes mega-categories which possessed no unified existence but in the external circumstances which acted on particular families and individuals and which drove them into novel patterns of activity.

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