



## UPWARD MOBILITY OF CASTE GROUPS IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY AND SOUTH INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*At the beginning of Twentieth Century, the political sphere of South India witnessed a significant move. In some cities and towns, the communal organizations and its branches came into being in South India. They acted as pressure groups, claiming to represent the interests of various castes. They obtained concessions and privileges from the Madras Government. By the by, they began to influence the political parties to get adequate power and representation. They also conducted conferences and meetings with the sole aim of enhancing their status and position in the politics and society.*



**KEYWORDS:** Madras Presidency, Caste, varna, Census, Sanskritization, British.

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of caste acquired a new connotation in popular political vocabulary. It was filled with vitriolic communal terms.<sup>1</sup> With the introduction of the Minto-Morley reforms, the British Government encourages the communal organisations to assert their political rights in India.<sup>2</sup> The caste or communal organisations utilising this trend to gain political mileage. Each Madrasi felt the need to establish its own caste constituency, and the chronology of communalism helped underscore its importance.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, other interested groups, such as landowners, zamindars, merchants, workers, and others, organized themselves into associations. Simultaneously, Muslims and Christians expressed their solidarity. Thus, the provincial political arena of Madras was filled with numerous organizations with divergent interests, primarily communal in nature. The concept of caste thus became a language of social mobility. This development profoundly influenced the political history of South India<sup>4</sup> and pushed South Indian society towards new principles of political organization and a new structure of political relations.<sup>5</sup>

### CASTE AND VARNA

Caste determined a person's place in Hindu society and his relationships with other Hindus. It was followed by a person from birth to death. The theory that all existing castes descended from the four *varna* classes through an elaborate series of interbreeding influenced early European writers on the subject. But it was also felt that that caste division had no direct relationship with class division.

Castes arose independently, without any consideration for classes.<sup>6</sup> During the era of Manu, both caste system and *varna* were present.<sup>7</sup> However, the *varna* structure eventually deteriorated into an unsustainable caste hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Caste and class were interconnected, not inherited from parent to child, but rather from family lineage to broader categories. The former represented the external view and the latter the internal view of social organization.<sup>9</sup> The individual was most concerned with the caste to which he actually belonged.

### The Census- Granting Status to Lower Caste People

From the Indian census report, it is clear that the classification of communities into *varnas* has often undergone modifications in the modern era due to claims for higher ranks by various castes originating from lower strata. In each census, a large number of castes came forward claiming to belong to one or other of the four main classes. These claims were in no way intended to sacrifice the exclusivity of their respective castes, but rather to elevate their status in the *varna* hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> The best example of this claim for social advancement was that of the Kammala caste, who wished to be listed in the census report as Brahmins.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the Vanniyars or Pallis and the Nadars of Tamil Nadu, despite their backwardness, wished to be listed in the census report as Kshatriyas.<sup>12</sup> M.N. Srinivas explained this upward mobility of the lower castes. According to him, when a lower caste became wealthy, it used to Sanskritize its lifestyle and rituals and claimed to be a higher caste.<sup>13</sup> The lower castes' desire for social advancement was further stimulated when Sir Herbert Risley, Commissioner of the 1901 Census, provided a thorough account of the *jatis*' position in the local hierarchy, as well as each caste's affiliation with the *varna*.<sup>14</sup> Caste leaders organized associations and convened conferences of their members to take measures to ensure that their status was recorded in a manner they deemed honourable.

The lower castes' desire for social advancement created a sense of animosity among the upper castes which began to challenge their claims. Consequently, all groups waged a retaliatory campaign of mutual accusations. The leaders of all but the highest castes saw the census as an opportunity to press, and perhaps gain some recognition, for the social claims denied them by the upper castes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the census served as a government channel for caste mobility, acquiring a status equivalent to the copper grants of the ancient kings, which proclaimed the rank and privileges of a particular caste within the hierarchy of the *varna* system.<sup>16</sup> Thus, characteristic traits such as divinity and immutability, attributed to the *varna* system, became a thing of the past after the introduction of the census.

### Emergence of Caste Organisations in Madras Presidency

It is very difficult to understand the reasons for the proliferation of caste associations during the Madras Presidency. However, M.N. Srinivas, a renowned South Indian sociologist, attempted to explain the situation that facilitated the growth and development of caste organizations. The powerful revolution in transportation and communications during British rule was a major factor in population mobility between regions. The British administrators implemented plans to improve communications and transportation. They built railways, dug canals, and constructed roads that expanded commercial and social ties.<sup>17</sup> As a result, new cities emerged, becoming centres of economic, administrative, and educational activity that integrated previously displaced communities.

Rising literacy sparked an intellectual awakening among the inhabitants of the Madras Presidency and contributed to its politicization. Likewise, the printing press, a powerful agent of modernization, transmitted ideas and thoughts from one group to another over vast distances and created broader spaces of social perception. The new trends of changes enhanced by caste associations broken the barriers of the extreme provincialism of life in South India and laid the pathway for broader social collaboration.<sup>18</sup>

The development in communication and transportation placed a great impact on the trade and commercial activities of the middle class people in the Madras Presidency. Similarly, the agrarian

revolution that had begun there introduced new agricultural techniques and new crops, particularly cash crops, whose demand increased. This created new commercial opportunities. The volume of transactions between the city and the countryside increased considerably, and, at least to some extent, the Madras economy became linked to national and international markets.<sup>19</sup>

Some trading communities, such as the Komati, eager to exploit new opportunities, used kinship and local caste institutions to organize their affairs. As a result, their trading activities expanded considerably; their circle of contacts widened; their marriage alliances extended to wider areas. These broader networks often found expression in caste associations.<sup>20</sup> The business and trading communities of in south India formed caste associations to gather their caste members. The Nadars of Tirunelveli, Thanjavur and Ramnathapuram formed their own association, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the Devangas (weavers)<sup>22</sup> from Salem and Coimbatore, the Beri Chettis of Madras, and the Komatis of Andhra Districts formed their own caste associations to assert their rights. Thus the caste leaders organized a sort of Union, Association, Peravai or Sangam and even registered them.<sup>23</sup>

These associations were dedicated to social reform within the caste and sought to secure its better position in society at large.<sup>24</sup> Unwittingly, the Madras Government became the foster parent of these caste organizations. From the late Nineteenth Century, the Madras Government became increasingly willing to listen to political demands expressed in caste terms and to distribute government favours with at least caste considerations in mind.<sup>25</sup> This was amply demonstrated by the requests Edwin Montagu received from various caste groups in 1917.<sup>26</sup> Knowing the government's stance on issues of concern to them, men joined because they had access to group rewards.<sup>27</sup> This even encouraged the most prominent peasant communities in South India, particularly the Reddis and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh and the Gounders in Tamil Nadu, to mobilize as caste groups. Despite their parochial nature, these caste associations performed commendable social service. They founded banks and operated as masonic fraternities. Most of the caste organizations enhanced the way to promote education by starting student hostels and providing student scholarships to encourage them to get postings in the public sector.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, a new drive for upward mobility was emerged, expressed by caste associations. Their leaders presented arguments to the census authorities, demanding a higher classification for their respective castes in the census reports. These associations altered the lifestyle of their castes, moving it towards Sanskritization.<sup>29</sup> This had some direct changes. Vegetarianism made inroads into the lives of the lower castes. A small portion of the population abandoned alcohol consumption. The *dvijas*, lower-caste people wore the sacred thread. To these changes initiated by the lower caste organisations, the upper castes were hostile and they did not like the upward mobility of the lower castes. As a counter measure, in some places, the dominant upper castes resorted to violence against the lower and weaker castes. Unfortunately, inter-caste rivalry was considered due to the caste classification in the census reports.<sup>30</sup> The nationalists viewed the registration of castes in the census as a sinister plan by British administrators to maintain the numerous divisions which were already present in Indian society.<sup>31</sup>

Their suspicions were further strengthened when untouchables were distinguished from other Hindus during the 1911 census. Furthermore, early census reports showed caste divisions not only among Hindus, but also between Muslims and Christians. But the later census reports did not enter the census of the minorities like the Muslims and Christians. This confirmed the nationalists' suspicions.<sup>32</sup> The reason for the emergence of caste associations was considered a valid conclusion. He considered the emergence of caste associations, a Twentieth-Century phenomenon, was the result of the professional elite's inability to resolve the tensions generated by the uneven pace of Western influence in South India.<sup>33</sup>

In light of these developments in the upward mobility of the caste groups, it can be deduced that the rise of the Justice Party was fundamentally a movement to gain mobility for caste groups that were lower in comparing with the Brahmins even though Westernization was already commenced.<sup>34</sup>

In the first half of the Twentieth Century, most of the castes formed their associations to assert their social and political rights. The Minto-Morley Reforms and Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms fostered the communal and caste organisations. The ascendancy of the Justice Party in Madras Presidency was boon to the growth of the caste organisations. During the period of the Justice Ministry, many castes claimed their superior status. They even approached the census commissioners to register their superior status, aiming at attaining political castes. M.M. Srinivas called this trend as 'Sanskritization' or Upward Mobility' of the Castes. This trend also ensured proportionate representation of the caste members in the public bodies and strengthened the reservation policy of the Madras Government

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