

K.K.PILLAY'S INTERPRETATION OF SOUTH INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM - A STUDY

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Dr. K. Kanagasabapathy Pillai popularly known as Dr. K.K. Pillay, was born as the eldest son of Kolappa Pillai and Parvathy on 3rd April, 1905 in an agricultural family in the small hamlet of Veerani of Kalkulam Taluk of Kanyakumari district - the then Travancore state.¹ His father Kolappa Pillai was a village school master proficient in both Tamil and Malayalam, and Dr. Pillay used to fondly recollected his father as "**Thinnai Pallikooda Vathiyar**". His sister Mrs. Ammu got married and settled in Kanyakumari District.²

K.K.Pillay had his primary education in the local school and later joined the English High School at Kottar, a suburb of Nagercoil town. After his school of education he joined in the intermediate course at the Scott Christian College, Nagercoil. He selected the History batch with Ancient History, Indian History and History of Great Britain as optional subjects. At that time Raw Eastaff and G.H.Horsdan were acted as Principals.³

After his intermediate course he completed his B.A. Honours degree in History with distinction from Maharaja's College at Trivandrum in which Prof. K.V.Rengaswamy Iyengar and Prof. C.V. Chandrasekaran were the principals at that time.⁴

He started his career as a lecturer at Government Arts College, Kumbakonam in 1927 and subsequently became the Professor of History at the Presidency College Madras. In 1946, he received the D. Litt degree for his magnum opus publication entitled "The Suchindrum Temple". During the course of his research activities he was motivated and inspired by **Kavimani Desika Vinayagam Pillai**, a celebrated Tamil scholar to whom he dedicated the volume.⁵ Undoubtedly the book is a distinct contribution to south Indian history. In 1948, he obtained his D.Phil. degree from the **School of Oriented and African studies**, in the Oxford University for his work, **History of Self Governance in the Madras Presidency (A.D. 1882 - 1918)**, under the guidance of Prof. C.H. Philips. In 1954 he was appointed as Professor of Indian History in the University of Madras.⁶ Later he became the Professor of Area studies in the same University in 1961. After retiring from the University, he became the Director of the Institute of Traditional Culture of South and South-East Asia,

succeeding Prof. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri.⁷ Thus he had the association with the handling of problems of history and culture for all over half a century.

Dr. K.K. Pillay was one of the pioneers to encourage research in historical studies. His research works had paved the way to unearth many historical facts. He reiterated that historians should possess the basic qualities of honesty, sincerity, judiciousness and impartiality and that a narrow - minded, one - sided and emotional approach towards issues relating to caste, language etc should be strictly avoided. He also had the strong notion that historians should not rely totally on data from stone inscriptions alone to put forth their research findings but should be well informed about the fields of literature, anthropology, psychology, sociology, philosophy and politics to present their research findings in an effective and unbiased manner.

Dr. Pillay had delivered the presidential addresses at the Indian History Congress at Jabbalpore 1970, and at the History Associations of the Madurai Kamaraj, Annamalai and Calicut Universities, the Presidency College, Pachaiyappa's College and Christian College, Madras.⁸

Besides several books in Tamil on the history and culture of Tamilnadu, Dr. Pillay has several other publications which include *The Suchindrum Temple - Monograph*, *Social History of the Tamils South India and Ceylon*, *History of Local Self Government in the Madras - Presidency (1850-1919)*.

His interpretation on caste system in south India

Dr. K.K. Pillay analysed very deeply about the caste system which prevailed in the Tamil country. According to K.K.Pillay "Caste is an emotionally loaded theme, therefore, in handling the subject, care has to be taken to avoid wounding the sentiments of people of the different castes".⁹ That does not mean however, that the plain truth as one sees it should be suppressed or camouflaged courage of conviction is an imperative necessity. Dr. K.K. Pillay says that "I am sure that my ideas on the caste system in Tamil Nadu will not be pleasing either to the Brahmins, caste Hindu non-Brahmins or the depressed classes".¹⁰

He strengthened his views with more points gathered from different sources. In the *Jataka* stories it is seen that the Brahmins lived even as farm labourers, hunters and army commanders. Obviously therefore, it is clear that all the Sudras were not relegated to the menial service, as *Manu* makes it to be understood. The list of the

Manusmirti, however, does indicate that some Sudras were occupying high positions.¹¹ According to K.K.Pillay, the geographical horizon of the *Manusmirti* was confined to the region north of the Vindhya. But in the course of time the canons of Manu had their influence in the south too, and by that time, the Sudras were accorded a low position.¹² The main duty of the Sudras in the post - Manu period was to serve the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. He had referred the famous *Manavadharmasastra* and gave more information details about Sudras. K.K. Pillay observes that the Sudras must be reduced to slavery either by purchase or otherwise because they are created by God for the sake of serving others.

He explained the caste system in different periods. He said that in the Vedic period there was no difficulty for anyone to become a Brahmin provided one was prepared to go through the *Dvija baptism*.¹³ In the post-Vedic period even some eminent teachers of the *Upanishad* remained as Sudras, for to be a Brahmins was no sine qua nor for respectively.

As rightly pointed out by K.K.Pillay, in the Rig Vedic days, the Brahmins would appear to have been as minor attendants at the Vedic sacrifices. It is notable that Brahmins are mentioned only in a few places in the Rig Veda as to sing hymns.¹⁴

A still further deterioration of the position of the Sudras appeared with Manu. By this time the position of the Brahmins had become firmly entrenched and Manu was very stern to the Sudras.

K.K.Pillay observes that the Brahmin superiority should be considered as commencing from this period which could not have been earlier than the 5th century A.D. The Brahmin superiority in learning was due to their excellent system of compulsory education. The secret of the respect enjoyed by the Brahmins is given in *Manusmirti* itself for they possessed the Vedas.¹⁵ In its present form *Manusmirti* may be assigned to the period of 100 BC and AD 300. The master stroke in Brahman diplomacy was the creation of new castes.

Dr. K.K. Pillay explained the existence of different types of caste and sub caste systems very clearly. He even explained about their immigrants. He took evidence from the Sangam classics and *Tolkappiyam* which give more details about caste system. He explained the caste of *Kadavar*, *Tattalikottuvar*, *Uvaiccan*, *Adigalmar*, *Agaambadiyar*, *Idaiyar*, *Ilavar*.¹⁶ These castes existed during the Chola Pallava and early Pandya period. During the Chola period we hear about several castes due to intercaste marriages and of the decision

given by the learned among the Brahmins regarding the status of the offspring of such mixed marriages. K.K. Pillay analysed some of the castes which prevailed at that time.¹⁷

i) Vellalas

An influential community of the non-Brahmins is the Vellalas. There are several categories among Vellalas. In the Chola period the distinction between Tondaimandalam Vellalas, Karkarta Vellalas, Nanchinad Vellalas and Kongu Vellalas had emerged based on the region occupied by them and on the basis of vegetarianism adopted by the different sections.¹⁸ A part from the proliferation of individual Vellala caste, all Vellalas can be divided in to vegetarian (Saiva Vellalas) and non-vegetarian. Among the Saiva Vellalas, **Sekkilar** of the 12th century and **Meykandar** of the 13th century were famous.

ii) Chettis

According to K.K. Pillay the name **Chetti** figures in Tamil literature beginning from the time of *Manimekalai* in which there is a reference on one Saduvan, a member of the mercantile community. In fact, through the ages, Chettis had been associated with commercial activities. Though the **Nattukkottai Chettis**¹⁹ are the most out standing group of this class, there were others like the Kasukkarar Chettis and Beri Chettis. Among the Nattukkottai Chettis there are three sub divisions (i) Sundaram (ii) Ariyur and (iii) Ilayattakkudi. Kudirai Chetti was an interesting community that flourished about the time of the Imperial Cholas. Their name indicates that they were the traders of horses.

iii) Kallar

According to K.K.Pillay, the Kallars have been known from a time earlier than the Imperial Chola period. They had some affinities with the **Agamudaiyar** and **Maravar** who have been dominant in the Tanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai and the southern Districts from an early time.²⁰

iv) Kaikkolar

As early as the Sangam age we hear of **Kaikkolar**, a caste of weavers. The Kaikkolars have been called as **Senguntar**, which indicates the military power possessed by the community. Some of them come from Maharashtra and Gujarat area. They have been known as **Pattunulkarar**. They become richer and more influential than the Kaikkolar.²¹

v) Nadar

Apart from the legendary origin of the community, one group known as the Nadars, entered Tirunelveli. During the time of the Imperial Cholas, a group of people called themselves as Shanars who came to south Travancore to serve as climbers of palmyra trees.²² Eventually there was some fusion between the Nadars and Shanars.

vi) Pallis

As per the observations of K.K.Pillay, an early community is that of the Pallis. In the age of the Nayaks of Thanjavur several Pallis assumed titles like Chera, Chola, Pandya, Sambuvarayar, Nayakar, Padayachi, Pillai, Reddi and so on. Sanskritization is conspicuous among the Pallis. They imitate the Brahminical way of living.

vii) Chakkiliyar

K.K. Pillay pointed out that the Chakkiliyar form one of the lower castes. There is no mention of them in early Tamil literature. They are workers on leather. It was their duty to remove the dead cattle from village. In return the Chakkiliyar had to supply leather for agricultural purpose.

viii) Paraiyar

One of the most down-trodden castes in Tamil Nadu was that of the Paraiyar. In the inscription of Raja Raja I, this caste has been mentioned under the name Paraiyar. In recent times several subsects have arisen among the Paraiyar like Samban, Sangidian, Soliya, Konga, Morasu, Kilakkattai, Katti and Valangmattu. After independence, this caste group people are gradually improving their socio-economic, political status due to various factors.

ix) Ambattan

Ambattan is the name of the barber through the ages. He was also known as **Navidan**. In later times he came to be known as **Pariyari**. The barber in due course became a musician, particularly a player on the pipe. There is a tradition that the Ambattans are the descendants of the offspring of a Vaisya women by a Brahmin.²³

x) Kammalar

An interesting community is that of the Kammalar or smith. The Kammalar call themselves Visvakarmas and believe that they are even superior to Brahmins. The Kammalas were well organized. The five divisions among them were goldsmiths (Tattan) brass-smiths (Kannaan), carpenter (Tachchan), stone mason (Kal Tachchan) and blacksmith (Kollan or Karuman).²⁴

To summarize the writings on the caste system in South India particularly in the erstwhile Tamilaham, K.K.Pillay did tremendous services to bring out a number of valuable as well as new information through his intensive field research as well as analyzing the Tamil literature starting from Sangam literature.

END NOTES

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3. **Ibid.**, p. 60.
4. **Ibid.**, p. 58.
5. Personal Interview with P.Thiraviam, aged 73, Nagercoil on 10.10.2018.
6. **Ibid.**
7. **Ibid.**
8. Personal Interview with K. Thanumalayan, aged 68, on 5.11.2018.
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10. K.K.Pillay, **Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamilnadu**, Madras, 1976, pp.30.40.
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12. K.K.Pillay, **Historical Heritage of the Tamils**, Chennai, 2008, pp.10-20.
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14. **Ibid.**, P. 29.
15. T.S.Ramalingam, **History of India**, Madurai, 1980, pp.25-35.
16. K.K.Pillay, **Studies in the History of India with Special Reference to Tamilnadu**, pp.20-30.
17. **Ibid.**,
18. **Ibid.**,
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21. **Ibid.**,
22. Robert Hardgrave, (Reprint) **The Nadars of Tamilnad- The Political Culture of the community in change**, Bombay, 1964, pp.120-130.
23. **Op.cit.**, pp.20-30.
24. **Ibid.**,