

STATUS OF TAMIL SOCIETY IN MODERN PERIOD

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In the modern period, the Nadars played a vital role in the struggle for social equality. In the southern part of TamilNadu they were also an untouchable community till late in the twentieth century. During the modern period, there was an enormous increase in the number of land titles held by Nadars. Once the land owners among them were limited to the aristocratic Nadar families, there were now thousands of landowners.¹ The plots were often minute, but they were intensely cultivated for garden crops, such as chillies, onion and betel vine. These garden plots in the middle of the desolate terra country were watered from deep wells. "If water exists under the ground", wrote Pate, "a Shanar will find it, and will quickly convert into a luxuriant garden a patch of poor soil, which in the time of its previous owner, had been dreary waste".²

It has been suggested that they were originally inhabitants of Tamil Nadu, who went to Ceylon along with Chola Kings, who invaded the island. After the invasions, many of them stayed on and lived there for a long time and later returned to their home land. When they returned to Tamil Nadu, the most fertile lands had already been occupied by the Vellalas. Therefore they had to go and occupy the arid regions in Tinnevely and its surrounding places. They started their life by performing strenuous work such as toddy-tapping which they perhaps learnt from Ceylon and imported it into Tamil Nadu.³

As newcomers they were denied privileges such as wearing an upper cloth and entering temples by the Vellalas who had already settled themselves in the fertile areas of the Tamilakam. Their low occupation, toddy-tapping which they were forced to take up owing to dire economic circumstances, intensified the contempt of the high caste Hindus.⁴ The very fact that they had to fight for their privileges such as the right of entering temples in 1874, the right of their women to wear upper jackets in 1858 and the right to take processions in the streets of other castes in 1885 shows that they had no such privileges formerly. At the same time their continuous claim to a higher status indirectly hints at their former greatness, lost in course of time owing to adverse circumstances.

Temple worship is entirely based on Agamas during last decade of the eighteenth century. The Brahmins took part only in the worship of Siva and Vishnu temples. The duties connected with the actual worship of the idol are carried out by Gurukkals in Siva Temples and by pancharatra or vailhanasa Archakas in Vishnu temples.⁵ At the time of worship some Brahmins called Adhyapakas, recite the Vedas. Thevaram and Thiruvaimozhi are also repeated, the former by Brahmins at Vishnu temples and the latter by Pandarams at Siva temples. It is recorded in the Gazetteer of the Tanjore district that "One ceremony peculiar to the Milaganur Brabachnams is that, before the principal marriage ceremonies of the first day, a feast is given to four married women, a widow and a bachelor. This is called the adhisya pendugal-ceremony. It is intended to

propitiate four wives belonging to this subdivision, who are said to have been cruelly treated by their mothers-in-law and cursed. They were represented to have feasted a widow, and to have then disappeared.⁶

The Maravas are a warlike community serving in the forces of the local chieftains. They held a status like that enjoyed by the Rajputs of western India. Many of the Tamil Poligars belonged to this community. Like other castes, the Maravas were divided into sub-castes, of which the principal were, Chamba Nattu Maravars, Kondaiyan Kotai Maravars, Kothikar and Vanniyars. They worshipped Siva and several demy gods of which the most conspicuous was Chudalai Madan, the lord of the cremation grounds. Like the Brahmins, the Vellalas worshipped Siva and Various Saktis or female desctructive spirits. They built temples for the family deities and employed priests called Pandarams in their temples when they were affected by sickness, they made vows to ornaments the temple of Sakthi, who was believed to have caused the disease. If they recovered, they made an image of a child or a horse, placed it in the court of the temple and carried out by the promised ornamentation.⁷

The communal hatred and restrictions kept alive a diversity of social customs and habits, were varied from group to group. The social disunity rested upon two factors: prominence claimed by the strength of arms and superiority assumed by virtue of birth. This on the one hand rendered certain section of the population aggressive and violent and on the other, left the inferior sections backward and downtrodden. As a result of the division of society on the basis of the profession of arms, some castes considered themselves as more destined for warfare than the cultivation of the art of the peace. They looked upon military service as the means of building up their fortune. Neglecting the finer aspects of life, they lived in a state of ignorance, with the disposition prone to dispute and quarrel among themselves on every trifling occasion, often terminating in blood. They practiced the law of retaliation very strictly.

The Maravas and Kallas in particular had an aptitude, peculiar to themselves to maintain with violence an opinion once they formed whether it was right or wrong. Another ostensible tendency was to consider large sections of the people as socially inferior. The contempt with which they were treated was carried to such an extent as to believe that their presence or even their footprints contaminated the surrounding area. A Paraiya was forbidden to cross a Brahmin locality. If he does so, the Brahmin had the right to inflict the severest blows, not with his hands or even with the end of a stick, but to order people of the low castes, who appeared ready to do the job. If a Paraiya entered a Brahmin's house either accidentally or intentionally, he was murdered. It was a total contamination to eat food prepared by a member of the low caste. The contaminate person instantaneously lost his cast status. Fortunately, there was provision for remedy, for otherwise the purity of a superior caste might have been diluted in one way or other. The remedy consisted of elaborate purification ceremonies dominated by a series of baths.⁸ The conflict of interests arising out of the issue of preservation of purity and pretensions of caste, left the advanced sections engaged as to leave a ruler free to practice his absoluteion in the way he decided.

It is not difficult to understand the implications of a system based upon iniquity and hatred. Internal dissensions invited external intervention in the country. The habit to view the things through the angle of caste seriously discouraged new thought and development of new enterprises. The absence of freedom to take up a profession except that was considered noble and associated to a superior caste retarded economic advancement. The downtrodden communities entertained a conviction that they were born in subordination and as inferior to other castes, leaving them bankrupt of any enterprising and adventurous spirit.⁹ This was so strongly ingrained in their minds that it never occurred to them that their fate was revocable. They lived a life of hand to mouth existence all the year. An implicit conviction in their social inferiority kept them always downtrodden. In short, pre-occupation of the inhabitants with the preservation of communal pretensions, the constant endeavor of higher castes to uphold the superiority that they claimed, absence of freedom to do a work of one's interest, an inferiority complex engendered in the minds of the low class people. All the by-products of the philosophy of caste and a system of hatred presided over by the priests made the society not only the most iniquitous but backward among the world communities.

The social customs and practices in the country during the end of the eighteenth century retained rigidity and rigour as in an unrefined society. The social concept, crude as it was, worked towards the suppression of human aspirations, rights and interests. The society restricted the scope of human association. People believed that no good could come by treating the low-born with unaccustomed respect or of employing anyone in occupations for which he was by decent unqualified.¹⁰ Despite the poverty in the land, the marriage ceremonies were made complex and expensive. Severity attended the treatment of widows.

Rituals and superstitions gained too tight a hold on the mind that they enslaved it completely. The tyranny of custom limited the sphere within which the rational faculties of the mind could act. Novel expedient, innovation and reform were things prohibited by the outlook upon life.¹¹ Motivated by obligations rather than realities, the human outlook lacked vision, imagination and enterprise. Nevertheless, charitable endowments and learning received the fundamentally religious. If the century did not present an entirely gloomy picture it was much because of the stability as family as social institution. General poverty and a warm climate accounted for the simplicity of garments. A common man wore nothing but a piece of colico, wrapped about his middle and another piece above his head. The Marava male wore a lower cloth, an upper cloth, a turban and a handkerchief, while a Kallan a coarse cloth tied around his body and a string around his woolly hair. A Totien in addition to the usual piece of cloth tied a colour handkerchief around his head. The dress of a woman on the other hand, consisted of a single cloth called chelai of not less than eight yards. Because of the meager dress, a common family was not required to spend any large amount on this account. However, a family fascination of women for dead capital, the jewellery. If a family was sufficiently affluent, the women never left the male members at rest until they decorated themselves with a variety of ornaments. They poised at every possible point the ears, nose, neck, arms, wrist, above elbow, feet, ankles and toe. Both men and women applied oil all over their bodies. The women oiled the hair, rolled it up behind into a sort of chignon and fastened it behind the ears.¹²

All the castes permitted the beginning of wedded life at an early age, for the principal source of happiness consisted of the solaces of a domestic life. In the first year of marriage, on festival days the parents of the girl invited their son-in-law and daughter to their life house and entertains them for several days.¹³

The country was not ridden with the grave social evils. It marks a characteristic feature of the western society. The European settlements in the country served as the hot-beds of vices boys and girls being susceptible to the worst evils incidental to the unrestrained passions of youth. There were instances of polygamy, polyandry and adultery. The chieftains, particularly Mohammodans, married more than one wife.¹⁴ Among the Kallans of the western region of Madurai it was an extraordinary practice for a women to have a large number of husbands. Every year the temple servants made a choice of a women for their God. Wherever they found a girl attractive and young for their ulterior purpose they took her to the temple, performed the nuptial ceremony and called her as the God's wife, a similar practice in ancient Rome.¹⁵ The devadasis or dancing girls of the temples sold their flesh to the needy; each charged two to four fanams for a night.¹⁶

Among the Totiens it was no illegal practice for a women to cohabit with her priest, uncle and even father-in-law. But if she had any such commerce with a man not belonging to her husband's family, she was put to death or expelled from the community. Most of the castes seldom permitted divorce. However, the Kallans and the Maravars exercised it with the consent of the elders of community. A Kallan obtained a divorce after giving away a part of his property to his wife, while a Kallar women secured it after paying a sum of money usually forty-two fanams, to her husband.¹⁷ The Maravars permitted both the husband and wife to dispense with their wedded life without giving any reason and to get re-married.

The boldness exhibited by the unfortunate victims of the devil in throwing themselves upon the top of the pile, was spurious; for they no sooner felt the heat of the furnace beneath them than they began to make frantic efforts to escape their doom. Harrying to and from, struggling and fighting, tumbling one over another, they vainly endeavored to reach the edge of the pile, and filled the air the while with ear-piercing screams and groans. After this, their voices grew more and more feeble and at last were altogether last in the crackling and roaring of the flames. When all the bodies had been consumed, the Brahmins drew near to the still smoking pile, and after performing more ceremonies, collected the charred bones and ashes; and having carefully wrapped them in rich cloths, carries them to the island of Rameshwaram and there threw them into the sea. After that the pit was filled up and a temple was erected over its site in honor of the departed king and his wives who have been placed among goddesses. Likewise, in 1802 when Rajah Amir Singh of Tanjore died, his two wives perished in the flames.¹⁸

The tragic spectacles enacted in the different parts of the country in the name of the religion evoked neither the sympathy of gods nor the rationalism of the people. It has been asserted that "cases are on record when the women fleeing from the first touch of the fire was again forcibly placed upon the funeral pyre. To prevents such incidents, the male relations often took care to cover the body of the widow with wood, leaves and straw and then pressed it down by means of two bamboos before setting fire to the pyre. At the same time the thunderous noise of the crowd mingled with sounds of drums ensured that the cries of agony from the

wretched girl would not be heard by any spectator.” Indeed the blind faith in Brahmanical superstition rendered the inhabitants into savages in committing so obnoxious a crime on womanhood.

The society of Tamil country during the end of the eighteenth century consisted of many barbarian elements, through a few appeared to have taken interest in charitable endowments. As the Indian bureaucracy of the present day, the society gave no habitual consideration to the rights and interests of the individuals. Ignorance, low cunning and falsehood marked the character of large sections of the masses.¹⁹

The inhabitants considered these customers as a part of their religious obligation to contribute charities. The eighteenth century witnessed the establishment of no charitable institutions of any consequences. Yet the rich inhabitants and the corporate bodies of the weavers, artisans and merchants raised contribution for the support of the charitable establishments were inherited by them from the past.²⁰ The village communities, in order to supplement voluntary contributions made levies on imports, exports and professions. The country accounted for the working of numerous charitable establishments. In Tinnevely province alone there were 1500 institutions for the welfare of the travelers, poor people, pilgrims and merchants. In fact the society languished under the impact of the crude outlook toward life. The people, divided as they were by different religious systems and diverse caste distinctions, lived at variance with one another. Hinduism commanded the largest following, while Islam and Christianity had a hold on the rest of the population. Castes with their sub-castes, running to a large multitude presented insurmountable impediments to mobility within the society and susceptibility of it to external influences.

The end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century was a period of literary decadence. In the absence of political stability and social encouragement, learning received little attention. After the establishment of the Christian missionaries and the introduction of the western education, the people realized their position and rights. These features and the enlightenment of the people paved the way for the tremendous changes and movements which happened in the Tamil society during the nineteenth century.

End Notes

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3. R.L. Hardgave, *The New Mythology of a Caste in Change*, *Journal of Tamil Studies*, Vol.I. No.I, 1969, p.79.
4. H.R.Pate, *op.cit.*, p.126.
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13. Madras Council 9 August 1799 and 14 April 1800, *Public Despatches to England*, Vol. 35, pp.7 , 152
14. *Madras Census Report*, Madras, 1891, p.94
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