



Rise And Growth Of The Caste System In Tamilnadu An Overview

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Introduction

The word 'caste' comes from the Portuguese word 'casta' signifying breed, race or kind. The first use of the word 'caste' occur in 1563 in the writing of Garcia de Orta. The word 'caste' used by the French who spoke 'caste' meaning breed. It is not known whether the Portuguese or the French used it originally in this sense; the probability is that the Portuguese were the first to coin the word.

The word 'jati' or caste used in India specifies a subdivision of the larger division, Varna. 'Varna is believed to have been based on the colour or race. In post-vedic times in North India the four-fold division seems to have appeared.

The Varna concept was supposed to be based on the colour of the skin of a race and as a corollary of that belief emerged the theory that Varna's arose as a results of conquest of one race by another. But colour could not have been the fool-proof index of race. Could it be thought that the dasa, who perhaps become the ancestors of the sudras, were alone dark, while bramin, kshatrian and vaisya gradually developing into the priests, warriors and common men, were all fair in complexion?

Over the ages, subsequent to the epoch of the Brahmanas there appeared the caste or subdivision of the Varna's. It is well known that while were four Varna's there have been well over three thousand caste or jatis. A jati is partly occupational and partly a sociological sub-division within each varna.

The traditional association between caste and occupation, however, is far from dissolution. Though some mutations were possible, the traditional basis held ground for the most part. In recent times the extension of endogamy among the subdivisions of castes has tended to reduce the rigor of the caste; but it has influenced only a very small section of the Hindu population. It is notable that even a change of religion does not destroy the caste system; for among converts too, the older caste distinctions persist, perhaps in a middle form.

Europeans studying the Indian caste are sometimes tempted to identify it with class. But the two are different. Caste is based on birth, conferring social status, while

class is primarily a question of economic status. In a class society, status is determined by vocation and consequent income. It has been rightly said that caste and class are two parallel and overlapping system of status-grading in society. Sometimes the class and caste characteristics are parallel; at other they cut across each other.

But though the Indian caste system has developed certain distinctive features, there have been more or less similar social divisions in other countries. Analogous institutions have flourished in certain other countries of the world. In ancient Egypt there had existed a social division in which different groups adopted special features resembling those of the Indian caste system. But there was one vital difference. Intermarriage among the various groups was not prohibited. Further, in Egypt, all caste and professions were held in the same esteem. Moses, the celebrated law giver of the Jews, divided the people into groups resembling castes.

In respect of functional allotment to specific groups of people, the ordinances of the Theodosian Code of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century AD can be cited as providing a parallel instance to the Hindu system. But the most striking parallel instance to the Hindu Varna's may be found in early social organization of Japan which recognized four categories of people,

1. The court nobles who claimed decent from deities or emperors.
2. The military class
3. The Heimin or common people who were divided into cultivators, artisans and traders
4. A pariah class, engaged in despised occupations such as leather-work, which lived in separate village and could neither intermarry nor eat with the higher classes.

In respect of the earlier social organization of Japan there were some striking similarities with the Indian caste system. Analogous to the Chandalas of India, there the eta of Japan. But intermarriage was prohibited only with the lowest class; it was common among the rest; to that extent it was different from the usages of the Indian caste system. The hereditary caste system with the rigidly endogamous subgroups was the distinctive feature of the Indian pattern.

In Burma, as social organization similar in some respects to the Indian caste system existed. In Burma, under the Old rule of the Burmese monarchy, seven distinct classes of outcastes were recognized. The Burmese word for one of them is sandal, which resembles the Chandala of India. It may be noted that there are certain cases in Africa in which taboos associated with occupations have operated to prevent not merely intermarriage but any sexual relationship at all between pastoral and cultivating groups. Thus some elements of the Indian custom have been prevalent among several people in the world.

Origin and Development of the Caste System in India

The Indian caste system has been studied intensively by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, both Indian and European. But it is by no means easy to assess its origin, its traditional features, its merits and drawbacks. Indian writers have frequently yielded to the temptation of assigning it a religion oriented background, while certain European savants have viewed it with some deep-seated prejudice. Many of the western writers have failed to understand the inner meaning and significance of some Hindu social practices and traditional customs. Several Europeans approached the study of this hoary system with a prejudice that it is one of those social evils which the religious-minded Hindus had developed without proper reason.

Several theories have been advanced in explanation of the origin of the caste system. One of the vague and general hypotheses is that caste is nothing but the outcome of the herd instinct coupled with a natural division of labor. But those features exist among all people, and therefore they do not afford a specific explanation of the origin of the caste system.

Some think that the Hindu caste system emerged out of totemism. Caste is maintained by two prohibitions, one on interdining and the other on intermarriage. If one can trace the history and development of restriction in these two respects, both the origin and the development of caste will be revealed. These two inhibitions were found among certain early totemic groups.

For example, prohibition of interdining is found among some aborigines. An aboriginal tribe called Kharias in parts of Bihar and Orissa has a custom of the married daughter not being allowed to enter their own mother's kitchen. Its origin may be traced to the "Totem" taboo. The aborigines cherish and worship their respective totem. They are not allowed to eat with the people of their respective totem. But this taboo as well as that of intermarriage among certain tribes does not seem to be a convincing explanation of the complicated caste system.

Adoption of particular occupations was apparently the basis of caste. The Santals were originally casteless; but the list of sub-sects under different professions or calling shows the initial stage formation in the casteless society of the Santals. Like the Santals, the Mundas, now found in certain parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, created Varna divisions on the basis of calling or profession. It is significant that in the original habitat of the Mundas were the prime movers in creating the 'Varna's' and their Brahmin descendants were those who created and fanned the flame of caste differences. But is it probable that the culturally advanced Aryans or Dravidians would have modelled their caste system on the practices of the aborigines like the Santals and Mundas.

An orthodox view held regarding the origin of caste system in that which traces it to the so-called Purushasukta hymn. This hymn has been interpreted and explained by several thinkers, but its classical exposition is found in the great Manusmriti of Manu, the law-giver. According to the Purushasukta hymn it is believed that the Brahmins arose

from the mouth of the purusha(Brahma), the Kshatriya from both his arms, the vaisya from his thighs and the Sudra from his feet. Manu, however, in his interpretation, held that the Brahmin was born from the face of the Purusha. Manu associates caste with Brahma, while the Vishnu Purana holds the Purusha as identical with Vishnu.

On the basis of internal evidence Max Muller and several others hold that the Purushasukta hymn is an interpolation into the Vedic text. It is not improbable that Manu himself was the author of this interpolation. However, Manu exploits the Purushasukta hymn to exalt the position of the higher castes. It is significant to remember that in the Vedic days the position of the Sudras was not much lower than that of the Brahmins. Gradually there was a growing deterioration of the position of the Sudras. It is said in the Rig Vedic period the Brahmins performed White Magic while the Sudras performed Black Magic. Gradually the Sudras declined to adopt the baptism of the sacred threads. From that began the deterioration of the Sudras. The Brahmins adopted exclusiveness toward the Sudras first and in due course to those of the other Varna's.

The European scholars generally held that the caste system was product of the Aryan invasion, which led to the suppression of the Dasyus or the native population. But the fact of the Aryan invasion itself is now being questioned. Certain elements of similarity between the religion of the Persians and Aryans may well be explained from the Aryan ideas having travelled to Iran from India. Nor were the Dravidians identical with the Dasyus, the earlier inhabitants.

The Dasyus or Sudras themselves were not a despicable people in the Rig Vedic age. In fact, the evidence is that the Sudras occupied a respectable position. The only difference between the Brahmins and Sudras was a question of religious practice. If the Sudras were prepared to accept the Brahmana baptism with the Gayatri and the sacred thread they could have become even the highest among the Brahmins. The son of Dirghatamas through a Sudra servant women become a celebrated Rishi, established Rishikulas and made hymns for the Rig Veda. Again, the Rishis Kavasha and Vatsa were born of Sudra mothers who were servants. Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharatha, was the son of fisherwomen. In the Vedic age the caste system was very flexible. The difference then between the Brahmin and the Sudra lay in the Vedic period only in religious observance. Consequently, a Sudra was not allowed at the Vedic sacrifices. Religious difference played an important role in the development of caste, as Jolly, Winternitz and Fick have pointed out.

The deterioration of the position of the Sudras and the stiffening of the caste system appeared during the age of the Brahmanas which are commentaries on the hymns in the vedas. The determination of the date of the Brahmanas is by no mean easy. There are varying views ranging from 9th century BC to 4th century BC. It is notable that a low position was accorded to women similar to that of the Sudras. This is notable from Satapatha Brahmana, Paraskara Grhyasutra and the Baudhayana Dharmasutra. It is

learnt that women and Sudras were held in contempt by several authors of the Dharmasastras and Puranas also. In the law books like those of Manu and Yajnavalkya women and Sudras are described as lifelong slaves from birth to death.

The idea of superiority among castes may be said to have appeared with Kautilya of the 3rd century BC, who prescribed different duties for the people of different castes. The superiority complex among the higher castes was developed later. Even in the time of Kautilya the degradation of the Sudras was not marked, though the Sudras were regarded as workers and producers.

It should not be thought that in early times the Sudras were only manual labourers without any education. In fact, in the early period there was no branch of study from which the Sudras were excluded. It is significant that the Sudras were not debarred from the study of the Vedas. Even according to Manu who appears to have flourished about the 2nd century AD, the Vedas could be learnt by any one from a competent Sudra and that a lesson of the highest virtue could be learnt even from a Chandala. Manu held that everyone is born a Sudra; action alone makes one a dvija and knowledge of Brahma makes one a Brahmana. According to both Manu and Bhṛigu the division into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudras are not based on birth but on action guided by his inclination.

It must be remembered that in early times nobody appears to have adhered to the Varmashrama Dharma or caste, duties. The Arthashastra, which to the best of our knowledge, lays down for the first time the functions of the different Varna's, states also that the Brahmins and Sudras were as keen fighters as the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas.

From the Jataka stories it is seen that the Brahmins lived even as farm hands, hunters and trappers of wild animals, while some Sudras were kings, chiefs 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 text of the Manusmriti, however, does indicate that some Sudras were occupying high positions. The geographical horizon of the Manusmriti was confined to the region north of the Vindhyas, 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. The main duty of the Sudras in the post-Manu period was to serve the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas.

They were required to remove dirt, filth and carcasses. Manu had ordained 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. (Manavadharmasastra VIII. 413)

In the Vedic period, there was no difficulty for anyone to become a Brahmin provided one was prepared to go through the dvija baptism. In the post-Vedic period even some eminent teachers of the Upanishad remained as Sudras, for to be Brahmin was no sine qua non for respectability.

In the Rig Vedic days, the Brahmin would appear to have been a minor attendant at the Vedic sacrifices. It is notable that Brahmins are mentioned only in a few places in the Rig Veda, they had to sing hymns.

When the number of hymns that were to be sung alone increased, the Brahmins had to devote a considerable time in committing them to memory. First, the fathers sat with their sons and taught them how to chant the hymns. Then competent teachers among them may have been selected to teach groups of Brahmin boys. This appears to have been the beginning of the Gurukula; probably it served as the basis for the division of labour of later days. The privileged position of the Brahmin must have appeared about the Mauryan period.

The ascendancy of the Brahmin prestige from the time of Kautilya may be seen from the following ideas contained in the Arthashastra. (1) if any one of a lower caste abuses the habits of a higher caste the fine shall increase from three 'panas' upward (commencing from the lower caste), (2) that the limb of a Sudra with which he strikes a Brahmin shall be cut off.

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

For example, "Let a Sudra who commits adultery with a woman of twice-born, be placed on an iron bed well-heated, with fire kept ablaze with logs thrown continuously till the sinful wretch be burnt to death." (viii, 372 and 374)

Manu held that the Sudras must be reduced to slavery either-by purchase or without purchase, because they are created by God for the sake of serving others. (vii, 413)

The Brahmin superiority should be considered as commencing from this period which could not have been earlier than the Hunan inroad to India in the 5th century AD. It may have taken a few centuries before the influence of Manusmriti was felt. After the Manusmriti became popular, the King, too, became subordinate to the Brahmins. In Manu's picture of society of Kshatriya supremacy has passed to the Brahmin. On the whole, Jolly and Fick are right in holding religious differences as an important cause of the origin and development, not of caste.

It must be noted that there were old sayings of Manu which were collected together as Manusmriti or Manava Dharma Sastra. According to legend there were fourteen Manus. The Manusmriti itself refers to the Dharma Sastras of Atri, Gautama, Shaunaka and Vasishtha. It is important to reiterate that the geographical horizon of the Manava Dharma Sastra is confined to the region north of the Vindhyas. It must be noted, however, that Vishnu Smriti which was written after the Smriti of Yajnavalkya and

Manusmriti defines Aryavarta as not confined to the region described by Manu, but it applied to the hold of India.

The Manusmriti divides the society into two parts: The Aryans and the non-Aryans. The non-Aryans were called Anarya, Dasyu and Mlechcha. The term Dasyu also included the Chandalas, Shvapakas, etc. Manu says: 'Let every man, according to his ability, give wealth to Brahmins, detached from the world and learned in Scripture; such a giver shall attain Heaven after this life.' (xi, 6). Very early in the statutes, a universal law is proclaimed, the spirit of which prevades the whole code. This law lays down that whatever exists in the Universe is all, in effect, though not in form, the wealth of the Brahmins, since the Brahmin is entitled to it all by his primogeniture and eminence of birth.

Among the Smritis and commentaries on them, the often quoted one is Manusmriti and the popular version of it is one by Kalluka, who according to his own statement, was a Brahmin. By making Manu the creator of the world and receiving the law direct from him, the Brahmins have given a divine origin to their law.

Manusmriti gives very valuable information, both sociological and religious. It traces step by step the history of the Brahmin supremacy; it shows how they rose from mere indigent mendicants to a priestly hierarchy. But it is important to remember that the Manusmriti did not provide for the cultural arrogance and exclusiveness of the Brahmins. In the Manava dharmasastra (II 238 & 241) it is stated that Brahmana, could learn the Vedas even from a Sudra.

The Brahmins' superiority in learning was due to their excellent system of compulsory education. The secret of the respect enjoyed by the Brahmins is given in Manusmriti itself for they possess the Veda. The Vedas are sealed books for 90% of the Hindus even today. When did this monopoly appear? It must have occurred considerably later than the time of Manu. Earlier, there does not seem to have existed a class restriction in the matter of education.

The date of Manu who gave the final shape to Manusmriti is not easily determinable. In the opinion of Monier Williams, the earliest version of Manusmriti does not appear before the 6th century BC. The other commentaries are of much later date; that of Medhatithi is estimated to be of the 9th century AD, while that of Kalluka is estimated by Kane as of 13th century AD. But the last text of Manusmriti which was in force for a long time seems to have appeared about the third century AD. It must be remembered that the Manusmriti stands in close relation to Mahabharata, which contains about a tenth of the 2,700 of Manu's code. So it is later than Mahabharata and even later than the Arthasastra its present form the Manusmriti may be assigned to a period between 100 Bc and AD 300.

Development of Caste

The Brahmins took full advantage of the literary upheaval that took place during the patronage of the Guptas. They took the classical Sanskrit of the Gupta period as a medium of propaganda. They went through the ancient literature and suppressed those books that were inimical to their pretensions they rewrote those that were favourable to them with additions and alterations to classical Sanskrit Among the suppressed portions were those of the Vedas that held no claim to Brahmin superiority Among those that were altered and added on were the Puranas, where the heroes are represented as doing homage to the Brahmins. Even the Gods were made to obey the Brahmins.

Manusmriti was revised and new clauses were inserted to give a legal status to the new relationship between their priest and the king. Since then the Brahmins became the de-facto rulers of India. Brahminism prospered in the court of kings.

A Brahmin's killing of a Sudra was pronounced to be equivalent merely to the killing of a cat, a mongoose, a frog, a lizard or crow. It was stated that to serve a Brahmin learned in the Vedas is the highest duty of a Sudra. The Brahmin is by right the chief of this whole creation. He may without hesitation take the property of a Sudra for the purpose of a sacrifice, because a Sudra has nothing to do with sacrifices. If a Sudra mentions the name and class of the twice-born with contumely an iron nail ten fingers long shall be thrust red hot into his mouth. If he arrogantly teaches Brahmins their duty, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and into his ears. But no reciprocal punishments are prescribed for cantankerous Brahmins. This is inconsistent with what was stated earlier (Manava Dharma Sastra II 238 & 241) that a Brahmana could learn the Vedas even from a Sudra.

The master stroke in Brahmanic diplomacy was the creation of new orders of Kshatriyas by dvija baptism from the barbarians who came to India and from the indigenous Sudras who looked for social superiority. As will be seen later, this scheme did not work properly in the extreme south where a well-defined class of Kshatriyas did not exist.

Formation of New Castes

The formation of new castes is not as common as that of subcastes within a caste. The creation of new subcastes is due to the following causes (1) sometimes it is caused by migration to differ parts of the country; (2) sometimes a new subcaste is brought into existence by the adoption of a religious cult; as Sir Alfred Lyall has said, "sects always tend to become sub-castes": e.g. Kabirpanthis (3) subcastes are also formed by the adoption of new (and it is believed) reformed customs such as are followed by higher castes: e.g. by forbidding the remarriage of widows or by adopting a certain nicety about food; (4) another common cause is the adoption of new occupations. There have also been cases in which the adoption of a more dignified occupation has enabled subcastes to join other castes of a better status.

The early European observers regarded the caste system as an artificial creation, as a device of a clever priesthood for the permanent division and subjection of the masses or even as the creation of a single law-giver. Thus Abbe Dubois, among others, speaks of it as the ingenious device of Brahmins and clearly regards it as made by and for them. Ghurye holds the same view. He says: Caste is a Brahmanic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of India by the Brahmin prospectors." He regards caste as having arisen as a result of a racial difference and that endogamy, the outstanding feature of the system was first developed by the Brahmins in the plains of North India, and hence conveyed as a culture trait to other areas. But some writers have argued that it could not have been the ingenious creation of the Brahmins and they are of opinion that the origin of the caste is or rather than artificial. See the views of Nesfield, Ibbleston, Dahlamann, Blunt, Senart, Hutton (p. 173 ff) Sarat Chandra Koy, etc. Hutton's view is acceptable.

1. Nesfield regarded caste as a natural product of society in the creation of which religion played no part at all. He thinks that function and function alone was the foundation upon which the whole caste system of India was built up
2. Denzil Ibblesion held that caste is little more than an ordinary class society, made rigid, and he puts forth the tribal and religious explanation
3. Kisley, like several others, relied mainly on the theories of race and hypergamy to explain the caste system
4. Senart held that caste is the normal development of ancient Aryan institutions which assumed that form in the struggle to adapt themselves to the conditions with which they came into contact in India
5. Sarat Chandra Roy held that the Hindu caste system was rather the outcome of the interaction between the Indo-Aryan varna system on the one hand and the tribal system of the pre-Dravidian and the occupation class system of Dravidian on the other.
6. Hutton opines that the pre-Dravidian taboo on food and marriage based on a fear of the evil mania of strangers is responsible for the caste system.

Though several other writers have offered various explanations, it appears that Hutton provides a conclusion when he points out that the geographical isolation of India, the primitive association of power of transmission of qualities with food, primitive beliefs about totemism, and soul-stuff of like matter, ideas about ritual purity and pollution and the possibility of purification, the cultural role of the joint family and the institutions of ancestor-worship and the sacramental meal, the belief in past and future births and the karma theory, the beliefs in the magic associated with various occupations, economic guilds, the clash between matrilineal and patrilineal ways of life and between races resulting in color prejudice and notions about superiority and inferiority, and the development society into religious classes with exclusive privileges, all these factors were operative in the evolution of the caste system. Though sever scholars, European and

Indian, have devoted much attention to the study of systematic study of the lower orders in ancient India is still a desideratum.

Rise and Growth of the Caste System in Tamil Nadu

It is commonly believed that the caste system appeared in Tamilaham in the Sangam age. But we do hear of certain denominations which pertain to an earlier, i.e., the pre-historic epoch. Thus we hear of the Vettuvar, Villiyar, Irular and Pallar in the Sangam works. But they appear to have been the descendents of the pre-Tamil or pre-historic people belonging to the Proto-Austroloid or Negroid Stock. Perhaps the Tudiari, Panar, Parayar and Kadambar also belonged to the class of original tribes. True, these names are traceable to Tamil, as for example those who played on the Parai or drum were called Paraiyar. But while the name could have appeared later the people to whom the name applied might have been the earliest inhabitants.

In the Purananuru there is a reference to the four castes: "Verrumai terinda narpalullum. Obviously this specifies the Indian traditional four- fold caste system. Perhaps, even much earlier, i.e by the time of Tolkappiyam, which appears to have been composed prior to the classics of the third Sangam, the four castes are specified, though by different names. Tolkappiyar designates them as Andanar, Arasar, Vaisiyar and Vellalar. Whether the Vellalar were equated with the Sudras or not has been a matter of controversy; in later times the Vellalar formed only one section of the Sudras Perhaps the entire class of Sudras of the North Indian classification was then described in Tamilaham as Vellalar. However, this difference in the nomenclature is inexplicable. It is notable that the kshatriyas as such never figured in Tamilaham. The 'Vendar, the Tamil equivalent, was a composite class sometimes consisting of Vaisyas also; this difference from the North Indian practice is inexplicable. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were considered by Tolkappiyar as Dvijas, and as such, they alone were entitled to wear the sacred thread. This is clearly an Aryan practice. No reference found in any of the Sangam works also to people of any non-Brahmin castes wearing it.

A doubt arises whether the Aryans had imposed their entire Vama distinction among the Tamils before the Sangam age. One has to remember the variations in regard to nomenclature, in respect of Tolkappiyar's description of the duties and privileges of the various castes from the theoretical prescriptions of the Aryans are noticed. For instance, though warfare is the traditional avocation of the Kshatriyas, Tolkappiyar enunciates different prescription at various places of his work. In one context he says that the weapons of war can be handled by Vendar as well as Vaisyas, at another he states that the Sudras too, if commissioned by kings, are entitled to handle weapons. Moreover, Tolkappiyar maintains that Brahmins, too, could become kings at times." Again, we learn from several Sangam classics that Maravar and Malavar were included among fighters. Thus the Aryan four- fold classification must have penetrated into Tamilaham but gradually and that accounts for the variations.

The indigenous social stratification among the early Tamils was based on physiographic distinctions, which led to different occupations. The five-fold divisions Palai, Kurinchi, Mullai, Marudam and Neydal appear clearly in the Sangam works the resistance of the regions came to be known respectively as the Maravar, Kuravar, Ayar, Ulavar and Paradavar. But the distribution was largely conventional: transgressions of the regional barriers in respect of occupations were not infrequent. Thus for example, in Kurinchi, spinning of cotton yarn is known to have been undertaken. The tending of cows was not confined to the Mullai. It is learnt that early in the morning the sound of churning curd was heard from the houses in Palai, and presumably it must have been common in other regions as well. It appears that the Kurava from the Kurinchi territory could settle in the Mullai land and become an Idaiya (shepherd or cowherd), if he came to Marudam and took to cultivation he would become a Vellalan. Similarly, a Vellalan could settle in the Kurinchi land and become a Kurava. Even a fisherman could change his occupation; but this was rarely done, because his training was more of a specialized kind than those of the people of Kurinchi, Mullai and Marudam. However, the flexibility that existed in the Sangam age is different from the occupational division of the Varna'shrama Dhama of the Aryans. In Tamilaham of the Sangam age there was a fusion of the horizontal and vertical divisions of society.

We see that by the age of the Sangam classics numerous professions had appeared. The question arises as to how far the entry into the various professions was governed by birth. In other words, the question is whether the caste system, the typical institution of Hinduism, had appeared in the Sangam age in its full form.

Sometimes a facile view is put forward that the early Tamils, including those of the Sangam age, had no caste distinction and that caste was introduced only by the Aryans. This does not seem to be fully borne out by the known facts. In the first place though we hear of Brahmins, we do not find the other divisions so clear-cut as in the Aryan system. The Kshatriya is hardly mentioned; on the other hand, as stated earlier, peoples called Maravar, Malavar and others formed the warriors. The duties assigned to the Vaisyas and Sudras, too, were discharged by several classes of people. If the four-fold caste system based on color were introduced systematically by the Aryans, these imperfections and lacunae are inexplicable.

Secondly, in the Sangam works themselves, we find the mention of several groups which became the basis of caste organization in later times. There are numerous divisions which were not contemplated in the Aryan system of caste based on color.

What appears probable is that there emerged among the Tamils social divisions based upon their occupations which were determined largely by the region in which they lived. Gradually, the Kuravar, Ayar, Vellalar, Maravar and Paradavar, the people of Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Palai and Neydal respectively, tended to become endogamous groups. Pre-marital love and marriage seem to have normally occurred on the basis of these

divisions of society. But soon, within the age known as that of the Sangam epoch itself, there appeared subdivisions among the five divisions. These subdivisions were based on further occupational distribution on the one hand and the differences in economic position on the other. Thus, for example, a distinction arose between Vettuvār and Kuravār, the former hunters and the later hillmen pursuing more docile occupations. Moreover, among the Kurinji people who are originally known as Kuravār, there appeared another subdivision. Economically the lower section came to be known as Kodiyaṛ and Kodichiyaṛ while the upper one was continued to be called Kuravār and Kurattiyaṛ. Subsequently, groups pursuing auxiliary occupations appear like the smiths and potters, and in course of time, even further subdivisions rise among them. Occupation determined the caste, and sometimes occupations transgressed the barriers the caste, and sometimes occupations transgressed the barriers of the old regional division. Thus, for example, in Kurinchi spinning of cotton yarn was done.

We hear of several sub-castes in Purananuru, viz., the Mallan, Kuttan, Panan, Kadamban, Tudiyaṇ, Paraiyaṇ and Pulaiyaṇ. Clearly these groups came into being on the basis of the different occupations pursued by them. But it is important to remember that the same anthology, Purananuru (183) shows that the conception of the four-fold divisions on the Aryan pattern had been known and adopted. Moreover, Purananuru accords a higher social position to the Brahmin. Stanza 224 of Purananuru says that Brahmins performed 'Veda Velvi', i.e, sacrifices prescribed by the Vedas. Brahmins devoted their time to learning and the patronage of Vedic lore. It was believed that those who caused harm to Brahmins were heinous sinners. Kings patronized Brahmins by bestowing gifts of lands on them. It is interesting to learn that Ahananuru (337) speaks of the carrying of messages as having been entrusted to Brahmins. Tolkappiyam and Tirumurugarruppaḍi also prescribe the role of messengers to Brahmins. Padirruppattu describes their six-fold duties (3rd Decad: 24).

It does not, however, seem reasonable to assume that all the Brahmins in early Tamil Nadu were Aryan immigrants from the north. The persistence even to this day of divisions among the southern Brahmins into Vadama, Brihacharanam and Ashtasahasram shows that only one section of Brahmins had come from the north. The others were all indigenous people of Tamilaham who were enlisted in the class of Brahmins.

The few who came brought their ideas, institutions and culture with them into the new country. Almost from the outset the Brahmin immigrants sought the favor of the ruling king and succeeded in establishing their influence in the royal courts. In due course, this led to their acquisition of a lofty position in society and cultural set-up of the indigenous people, a total supplanting of the old by the new was impossible. What occurred, therefore was a social and cultural fusion. This was reflected in the caste system. The indigenous divisions and sub-divisions based entirely on occupations came to be amalgamated with four-fold division based on color. In actuality o the rise of the

Brahmin caste was the immediate effect of this change. The other sub-divisions of the Aryan caste were later attempted to be yoked into the existing order, although the Kshatriya and Vaisya groups have always remained numerically small.

In this connection it is noteworthy that the advent of the Buddhists and Jains into the Tamil country was indirectly responsible for certain changes in the caste system in the south. There was acute rivalry between Brahmins on the one hand and Buddhists and Jain on the other. An inevitable result of this rivalry was an increase in the rigidity of the caste system. The privileges of caste were jealously guarded. Another result was the growth of numerous subcastes which appeared side by side with the increased rigidity of the system.

The caste system assumed a hereditary character even in the Sangam age. But there was a considerable measure of laxity in the choice of occupations. For example, Nakkirar, the Brahmin, took to conch-cutting and to the trade on bangles they were called Velapparpar. There were many merchants, artisans and agriculturists besides Brahmins who took to the higher arts of learning and composing poems. The kings who were considered Kshatriyas married from the Vellala caste and some Vellalas became kings, too.

Attempts to classify the castes on the basis of racial origin have been made by certain writers V.A Smith thought that the Villavar or the bowmen were akin to Bhils and that they, as well as the Minavar or fishermen represented the earliest inhabitants and that they were akin to the aboriginal tribes in Malaya, Australia and other countries.

M. Srinivasa Aiyangar stated (in his Tamil Studies pp. 61 ff) that the Valayar, Pallar, Sanar, Idaiyar Maravar, Paraiyar, Kaikkolar, Kammalar, Vanniyar, Kallar and Ambalakkarakar were either Nagas or were descendents of a mixed race of Nagas and Dravidians. He holds that Kuravas alone represented the pure Nagas. This seems to be an over simplification of a complex problem. The Nagas appear in various places of India and at different stages of her history though no satisfactory explanation of their origin has been provided, it seems that they were of proto- Austroloid stock. There appears to have been an admixture of this element with the Dravidian population. To differentiate the Aryan from the others in South India is not also an easy affair. There had occurred such an admixture of the Aryan and Dravidian elements that except in respect of a small minority, the demarcation is not historically valid. A certain measure of wishful thinking on the one hand, and an attempt to read the present into the past on the other, have vitiated the proper approach to the study of this question of caste, its origin and development.

While one extreme school of writers blames the Aryans for having introduced the caste system into the south, the opposite school holds that the Aryans who came to the south were the harbingers of culture into a barbarous country and all that is admirable in the Tamil civilization is a consequent product of the advent of the Brahmins. Neither

of these extreme views is borne out by the known facts of history. We have already seen that caste in its entirety was not an importation from outside. Regarding the other extreme views of the Aryan culture having been the only basis of the Tamil civilization, as represented by the Sangam classics and the later works, it must be observed that though there is an admixture of Aryan ideas and practices even in the Sangam age, it is incorrect to think that the Aryans came and imported en bloc their ideas either totally discarding or destroying the existing culture. In fact, the Aryans absorbed some of the ideas and institutions of the Tamils. If the Tamils had not built up a civilization worth the name before the advent of the Aryans, the later Tamil culture would have been a mere replica of the North Indian civilization which is not the case, judged from any standard. In fact, it is incorrect to speak of the Aryanisation of South India, as is frequently done assuredly the impact of Aryans on Tamilaham is not comparable to the Romanisation of Gaul. If a European comparison were to be sought at all, it would be more appropriate to compare it with the Greek contact with the Aegean civilization as a result of which the later Hellenic culture developed.

That the Aryan culture was not introduced into Tamilaham in toto is clear from the circumstance that the distinctive Aryan pattern of caste did not establish itself completely supplanting the existing divisions. As seen earlier, there was an amalgamation of the indigenous and exotic patterns i.e., the occupational and color bases. This is evident from the Sangam classics which speak of both classes subdivisions of society. That the exotic system took some time before it could be recognized as the important social factor is seen from the circumstance that while Purananuru makes just a mention of the fourfold division and the numerous other castes based on occupation. Tolkappiyam gives a greater prominence to the Aryan or Varna basis of caste. However, Tolkappiyar speaks of the four castes in the Tamilian terminology; he mentions the Andanar (Brahmins), Arasar (Kings or Kshatriyas), Vaisyar and Velalar (cultivators, corresponding to Sudras). Obviously he groups the large class of people engaged in various occupations into those of brahmins, rulers, businessmen and sudras. He provides details about each of the castes. Brahmins wore the holy thread, had the Karaham or the vessel containing sacred water for ceremonial ablutions the Mukkol or a threepronged staff and Manai a wooden plank to be used as a seat. It is significant that Tolkappiyam says that the weapons of war are not to be handled by and but the men of the two middle castes, i.e., Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. Sudras too, if sent on government business, were entitled to have weapons. Tolkappiyam states that Brahmine could also become kings. These are clear deviation from the traditional prescriptions.

A remarkable feature of Tolkappiyar's account of the castes is that it does not include the indigenous tribal divisions and subdivisions among castes. This suggests that Tolkappiyam was concerned with the enforcement of the northern pattern of caste. The only local adoption he makes is that he equates the Vellalas (Velanmandar), the cultivators, with the Sudras.

It is sometimes said that, as stated earlier, the stanza 335) in Purananuru seems to protest against the Aryan system of caste, holding that Tamilaham accepts only the division of the people into four viz., Tudiyar, Panar, Paraiyar and Kadambar. But the context in which the work is set, as well as the restriction of the local divisions into the four groups mentioned above, show that it does not contain an exhaustive enumeration of all the units in Tamilaham. Set in the martial context, the poem speaks only of the martial or warlike sections among the and it cannot be taken as an exhaustive division. On the whole, it seems that the regional divisions and their numerous subdivisions continued to be the basic structure in the Sangam age, while the Aryan classification was introduced from the north which appeared as a kind of vertical differentiation cutting across the horizontal division already in existence.

By the time of the Tamil Epics, the two forces appeared to be getting entrenched, each in its own way. On the one hand, the supreme position of the Brahmins was established and strengthened by religious sanction, and on the other, the multiplication of subdivision among the regional groups of old increased. Ascetics and those who performed penance lived in separate quarters away from the madding crowd. The Brahm purohit became the master of ceremonies in connection with marriages among the other sections of the Hindu community. Kannagi is said to have requested the God of Fire to exempt Brahmins and ascetics from the ravages of fire when the city was to be burnt.

But there is little attempt to enforce the rigid prescriptions in respect of the Kshatriya and Vaisya castes. The royal armies did not consist of Kshatriyas but of Maravar or Eyinar, who according to the Aryan classification, must have been assigned to the Sudra group. Again, trade appears to have been common to the Vaisya and Vellalas. Alongside of this relaxation in the fourfold classification the multiplication of subdivisions in the regional groups went on apace. The smiths are grouped more rigidly into blacksmiths, goldsmiths and carpenters. Weavers, cobblers and other groups emerge. Differentiations in the social scale of superiority appear clearly in the age of Sangam. The idea of untouchability on the part of certain castes comes into vogue by the time of the Epics. Not only the Brahmins but certain sections of Vaisyas also dreaded pollution by members of lower caste. For instance, Silappadikaram says that the goldsmith took care to be at a distance from Kovalan, the Vaisya. Though even in the Sangam age certain sections like the Pulaiyar and Paraiyyar were treated as low born, the practice untouchability among the higher sections of the Sudras was a development of the later period namely that of the Epics.

Conclusion

In the Sangam age itself the emergence of a large number of sub-castes among the last or the so-called Sudra category is a notable feature. Thus. for instance, from the Sangam works we find the under mentioned groups: Alavar, Idaiyar, liyavar, Umanar, Ulavar, Eirriyar, Kadambar, Kammiyar, Kalamar, Kuyavar, Kuravar, Kurumbar, Kuttar, Kollar,

Kosar, Tachchar, Tuidiyar, Terpaka Tunaiyar, Paradavar, Paraiyar, Panar, Pulaiyar, Porunar, Malavar, Vadugar, Vannar, Vanigar and Vedar. They were all occupation-oriented divisions. But so far as our knowledge goes, there was no inhibition among them in respect of inter-dining. It is presumable that restrictions on inter-marriage between the various castes, however, seem to have gradually emerged even during the Sangam age. In the north the multiplication of jatis and the increase of caste restrictions developed in the period of the Dharmasutras, several centuries after the Vedic age perhaps similar tendencies appeared only after the Vedic age. Perhaps similar tendencies appeared only in the Sangam and post Sangam epochs.

When could the Aryans have introduced their pattern of stratification based on Varna into Tamilaham? From the circumstantial evidence it is possible that the introduction of the Northern caste system into the Andhra country took place in the age of the Satavahanas. During that period new sub-castes appeared on an occupational basis such as golikas (shepherds) and halikas (ploughmen). We learn that Satakarni I who ascended the throne about 189 BC performed a horse sacrifice. These provide some indications that in the Andhra country the Aryan ideas and the Varna'shrama system had taken root before the 2nd century BC. Not only that; some of the Satavahana kings were keen on preserving the Chaturvarnya pattern or Varna'shrama Dharma scrupulously. Gautamiputra Satakarni (c. AD 80-104) was a great supporter of the Brahmins. An inscription records how an Andhra King Vilivayakura II destroyed about AD 126 a Saka chief and 'prevented the mixing of the four castes.

It is not too much to hold that about this time the Aryan caste system entered the Tamil country too. The fact that it presented the features of the Aryan pattern of caste indicates that by that period, probably before the Tolkappiyar's time (2nd or 1st century BC) it had found its way into Tamilaham. But it must have been introduced gradually, however, by the time of the Great Pallavas it became firmly rooted. We find Mahendravarman II (c. AD 668-70) insisting on the preservation of the Vamashrama system. In fact, the Pallavas were par excellence the harbingers of Aryanism into the Tamil country.

It was during their period that the dominance of the Brahmins in Tamilaham became pronounced. The Pallavas exalted the Brahmins. It began from the time of the Imperial Pallavas that the kings and chiefs extended a reception to Brahmins and settled them in separate villages which were known as Agraharas. Since they were endowed to Brahmins they were also known as Brahmadeyas. It was for the purpose of patronizing religion that Brahmins were invited and settled. In the Madras Museum Plates there is a reference to a group of Brahmins brought from Magadha and settled in the south. Belonging to the Pallava period there are several grants bestowed on Brahmins by rulers for studying the Vedas and Vedangas. Several sub-castes among non-Brahmins had arisen. For example, an inscription of the Pallava king Nandi Pottaraiyar speaks of 'Aruvai

Vanigar' who were cloth merchants. In their own turn Brahmins are said to have gifted lands to a Vishnu temple, Jain Palli and Pidari shrine and also for a Vyakarana Hall.

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