

Origin and Evolution of Caste System in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Origin and Evolution of Caste system in Tamil Nadu is an attempt to trace out the Meaning and Definition and Changes in the Caste system through the ages. Generally India is a land of several religions, races and inequalities. Society in the Indian sub-continent has been segmented into several religions and caste groups. Majority of the people belongs to the Hindu religion in India. The Hindu society is a composite and comprises of several castes and sub-castes. These castes are not horizontal divisions of the society. Castes occupy various levels in the ladder of Hindu social hierarchy. A man had no individual identity in the past. Only caste rights and caste privileges were recognized and maintained through the ages. These castes were considered as prime part of units of the society people enjoyed varying status and rights. The social inequality was believed as divinely ordained. However, this system had to have faced lot of challenges from time to time. Whenever the challenges happened to appear, the Hindu society and the system followed so far underwent some modifications to suit the need of the society. Of course, the hierarchical system of the society was never given up by the caste Hindus. Several social reformers, leaders and administrators have tried to eradicate the social inequalities but it has been continuing with slight modifications and these efforts have been taken up ever since the period of Gautama Buddha. Under the British, several measures were introduced by the Government to bring about a change in the social condition of Tamil Nadu. However it could not be successful because people had difference of opinion among themselves

Key Words:- Cast, TamilNadu, Government, Social, People, .

Introduction

The term caste derived from the Portuguese word “Casta”, means breed, race, group. French used this term to indicate as breed. It is obvious and evident that an individual group, created for particular and specific reasons, due to their separate identity or occupations or particular way of life which is generally called a caste in India. This distinctive caste division causes fractions, separatism and group among the people in the society.

In India., i.e., Bharat, the land of the ruler Bharatha, during the ancient period, caste was called by the name Varna. The Chaturvarna system (four fold system of caste) which included the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras caused divisions and disparities among all the people on the basis of their routine occupations. Every one of them had their own individual forms and ways of life. This occupational division and groups among the people served as the basic foundation for

the emergence of the caste system, which was fully supported by the different colours(Varna) of the skin of men.

Tamil country, the southernmost part of peninsular India, had its own faith and belief over the well knitted social set up, which was actually based on certain custom oriented. The culture of the Tamil country, along with its individuality, has its specific and unique feature called “caste”, which increased in number gradually due to the arrival of variations in occupations, place and ways of life.

The term Jati, means caste according to India. The term Jati is based on the birth or descent. All the members of a particular Jati claim their common origin and practice of a traditional routine occupation. Adoption of the particular traditional occupation was a particular trait of specific set of people belonging to an individual community of homogeneous nature. All those people formed into different separate groups which obtained the name caste. E.A. Gait and Sir Herbert Risely have acknowledged and approved the above fact. Caste is based on a social class having a social stratification, traditional occupation, preoccupied rules and regulations with upward and progressive mobility. Caste, an endogamous social institution, has its own individual social, religious, economic and political traits.

The caste system prevalent in India is to make divisions and fractions among different Indian people. It plays significant role which is not in practice in other countries. It is a unique and individual social system prevailing only in India particularly based on birth with specific restrictions pertaining to marriage, food and social inter course. The caste offers wide scope for every individual to act as a unique person among the people of the area where they live. So the caste system is another significant feature in creating and promoting fractions and divisions among Indians which enables them to strengthen their own individual highness. Amidst its role as a means for creating schism, it is not all removed in India.

Though it is a strenuous problem to explicate the origin, growth and development of caste system, it is obvious that the Chaturvarna system, which was stressed the differences among men on the basis of occupation should have been the basic step based on the origin and evolution of caste in India. Subsequently the fourfold Varna system was gradually disappearing due to the arrival of increased number of sub- groups and divisions along with the sub-castes. At that juncture the then existed caste system overshadowed and superseded the Varna system. Therefore, no wrong in accepting both the varnas and castes led to divisions, groupism and disparities among people of the Indian sub-continent particularly in Tamil Nadu. The caste divisions cause divisions and fractions among the people within the society by maintaining their individual position in the society.

Definition of Caste

The word ‘Caste’ comes from Portuguese word ‘caste’ signifying ‘Breed’, Race or Class. According to this origin the word caste signifies a hereditary link with a family origin. According to E. A. Gait caste may be defined as, “An endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common name having the some traditional occupation claiming descent from the same source and commonly regarded as forming a single homogeneous community”.

Another Historian Sir Herbet Risely defines caste is a “collection of families bearing a common name claiming a common decent from a mythical ancestor human or divine. Professing to follow the same hereditary calling and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.”

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According to Emile Senart, “ Caste is a close corporation in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary equipped with certain traditional and independent organization including a chief and council meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining in the celebration of certain festivals, bound together by a common occupation observing certain usages which relates more particularly to marriage and food to question the ceremonial pollution and ruling by its members to do the exercise of a jurisdiction. The extent of which varies but succeeds by sanction of certain penalties and above all by the power of final or revocable exclusion from the group in making the authority of the community effectively felt.” The Sociologist Ketkar defines, caste as a social group having two characteristics:

(i) Membership is confined to those are born of members and include all persons so born (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of these groups has a special Name by which it is grouped together to make a common name while these large groups are but divisions of group still large which have independent names.”

Some other Scholars like Sir. Herbert Risley, G.S. Ghurye and R.C. Majumdar are of the opinion that caste system came up mainly because of the commingling and unification of many migrated groups of people with the natives. It caused the origin and emergence of the caste system. Scholars like J.H. Hutton never accepted this theory because race and occupation alone cannot be considered as the actual original cause for the arrival and outcome of the caste system. So along with the above mentioned, multifaceted factors, including the common things would have been the reason for the introduction of the different castes. Further the caste disparity or distinction is a permeated unique custom and tradition available only in the Indian subcontinent, which met with the arrival of many emigrants into the country for various economic, commercial and political reasons. On that line, this also maybe accepted that, after the formation of caste groups by their personal identities, physical nature and occupation. Caste system gained value importance and a solid ground and that allowed the castes to spread widely in all parts of India. Though castes caused distinctions, disparities and faction among people their origin should have been a common one. Specific common causes would have yielded ample opportunities for the arrival of different castes. Thus it is evident that the caste system in India is the outcome of the common native activities and traditions.

Caste System in Tamil Nadu

The caste system, which caused divisions and factions in the contemporary society, was prevalent in Tamil Nadu even during the Sangam age. Much authentic information on the social condition of the Sangam Age can be gathered from the Sangam Literatures. The following topics may be studied in this chapter.

- (i) Fivefold physiographical divisions
- (ii) The Caste system
- (iii) Social life of the people
- (iv) Position of women

i) Five Physiographical divisions

The people of the Sangam age led calm life according to their regular occupations. The people had different modes of living and occupations owing to the topographical division of their lands called Tinais. They are called Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neithal and Palai. Hunters lived in the Kurinji region, shepherds in the Mullai, peasants in the Marudam, fishermen in the Neithal and robbery in the Palai region. Their habits and customs; professions and duties: beliefs and worship

differed from one region to another: yet they were dependent in one way or other. A clear picture of each region may be studied here.

The system of caste was based on traditional occupations. For instance those who were engaged in beating drum (Parai) were called Paraiyar and in the same way who sang songs were called Paduvor and those executed Kuthu were Kuthar or Kuthiyar. Tolkappiyar, the grammarian and author of Tolkappiyam too has divided the Tamil people on the basis of their own individual occupations, duties and privileges. The sudras were employed by the rulers for handling weapons of varied types. They were called by many names such as Maravar, Kuravar, Ayar, Ulavar and Paradavar on the basis of land tracts such as Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neidhal and Palai. They were distinguished and stratified socially and occupations too determined the caste.

The caste system of that period was an occupational traditional and hereditary one. Aryanism did not allow the Tamils to follow the caste traditions adopted by the alien intruders. The Tamils, due to their individual customs and traditions, were unwilling to accept the Aryan form of caste divisions. The Tamil rulers patronised the Brahmins by offering and donating various things such as wealth and lands needed for them. The emigrant Brahmins too were assigned an exalted and envious position in the society. But the hereditary caste system also continued to survive and the disparities among caste groups also were prevalent. Because caste disparities are the age old customary and unavoidable practices and none can skip the existing traditions. Further as they carry on their life of hereditary nature due to the income from their occupations, they never overlook it or deviated from it. The Brahmins widely adopted the system of pollution and it became a deep rooted custom during the time of the greater Pallava ruler Mahendravarman II (668 - 670 A.D). Though the castes differed from customary practices, various occupations also determined the caste system. The castes were not at all uniform and they also varied in nature the basis of regional differences such as Kurinji, Mullai, Marudam, Neidal and Palai but occasionally the people's occupations too met with changes. It was mainly because of the changes which existed in the traits and qualities of the individuals or groups of people. The qualities and occupations are also distinguished and differentiated the people those who were engaged in similar occupations formed individual groups separately. Anyhow, factions and divisions were in common.

The different kinds of people called Mallan, Panan, Kuttan, Kadamban, Tudiyan, Parayan and Pulayan formed the sub castes which emerged in the Tamil country on the basis of occupations. It is also evident from Purananuru that the Tamils of the early Sangam period were aware of the Aryan system of caste traditions and hierarchy. The Brahmins, who were well versed in Vedas, and learned scholars and orthodox people executed all there religious as well as ceremonial rites and rituals scrupulously. They were employed by the Tamil rulers as messengers. Purananuru further reveals that there were four divisions of people called Tudiyan, Panar, Paraiyar, and Kadambar. The Tamil epics Cilappatikaram of Elangovadigal and Manimegalai of Seethalai Sathanar also contain details about groups of people called Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Vellalar. There prevailed untouchability and disparities among them. All of them maintained their own individualism in the day to day life and activities. The Aryans introduced the Varnashrama Dharma into the Tamil country after their penetration into the Tamil land. Even Mahendravarman II (668-670), the Pallava ruler, stressed the importance, essential need and preservation of the caste system.

Caste is played its role in all the spheres of the social life of the Tamils. Further during the Pallava period there were specific set of people involved in different types of occupations. Those

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who constructed buildings were called TattaliKottuwar. Likewisethe Uvaiccan was a drummer. The Devaradiyars or Devadasis, also known as Adigalmar were associated and attached with the temples as dancers. The Uttiramerur inscription of Parantaka I (907-953 A.D.) informs that Agambadiyar were people associated with agriculture and agrarian pursuits. The Idayar were cattle breeders. Thus it is clear that caste system was based on occupations during the Sangam periodas well as in the subsequent Pallava periods. The Chetties were people of business and mercantile communities. They were known as Nagarthar, NattukottaiChetty, BeriChetty, KasukkaraChetties, Komuttichetty and KudiraiChetty. They reveal that every caste had its own individual branches and sub divisions. Caste system thus became a widened and expanded one in a thickened form in the Tamil country and the Tamils without any aversion and opposition acknowledged and adopted them without knowing the consequences of the factions among them. They were unable to understand that caste system had divided them into groups.

The Kallars were the other powerful set of people in the southern regions of Tamil Nadu i.e., in the Chola and Pandya regions. They were closely associated with the modern Maravarand Agamudayar. They were not regular soldiers employed in an organised army. But they were only bandits. When the monarchies gained prominence politically the position of the Kallars also began to change. The Kallars formed a separate group of people, who indulged in theft and highway robbery. So the caste system occupied a unique place in the Tamil society and caused factions and divisions among the people based on economic considerations and disparities.

There were three subdivisions among the castes like the Nattukottai Chettiyars. They were belonging mainly to the following three areas:

- 1) Sundaram
- 2) Ariyur
- 3) Ilayarrankudi.

Beyond the above they are available in various other areas of Tamil Nadu as merchants and moneylenders. The other community people were able to obtain helps from them in all possible ways. They learnt a lot about the economic and financial dealings from them. So they are economically the most conspicuous people in the community even today. Each and every sub-division was divided into seven exogamous sets called Koils. They along with their religious affinities had their own strong and powerful caste Panchayats. Maintenance of caste justice is a common feature among all the communities. They adopted their individual and specific forms of dress and food habits which were distinctive in nature when compared with other castes and communities. They maintained their individualities personal individual identities by their own specific customs and traditions in their life practices. They were given up their affinities over caste ideologies.

For instance, the same way, the Nadars, a popular business and mercantile community of Tamil Nadu have their own separate divisions called Vahayara meaning group. They have matrimonial relations among themselves and mostly indulge in trade and commerce for their earnings and livelihood. They attach reverence, value and veneration to their clannish deities due to the pious nature. The Nadars feel proud in calling themselves as people belonging to a particular Vahayara or group of a particular region. The Nadars have their own pettais as centres for their trade and commerce. They stock their goods in the pettais and transact bulk business from there. The PanchuPettai (CottonPettai) of Aruppukkottai, Virudhunagar, Sivakasi and Sattur could be cited as

suitable examples. In some towns like Madurai and Virudhunagar they have their own betal patta is called Verrilaipettai. Thus the Pettais too served as ways and means for contacts among their groups.

The Chettiyar, Kammalar and Kaikkolar are other popular sets of people living all over the parts of Tamil Nadu. They are mostly involved in smith works. The Pallis, Chakkiliyar, Parayar, Ambattan are other caste groups involving in low level occupations and menial services with low social and economic status. There are numerous sub-divisions within those groups. Every set of people have their own conspicuous and glorious legends about their origin, evolution and growth. They maintain their caste traditions and social status without any deviation by their individual calibre and activities, customary practices and routine ways of life. They are constant and steady in their customs and traditions without any deviation. They never meddle or mingle with the other caste people. But they keep regular contacts with each other to satisfy their life oriented economic needs because they have their own occupations and jobs which could be executed only with the help and support of others. So there prevails well knitted co-operation and co-ordination among them. On that line they stand as models for other communities. There prevails co-operation and co-ordinated efforts among them in all aspects which stand to reveal the unity.

Changes in Caste System during the Modern period

Caste is a permanent and unavoidable feature in the Tamil society it has to alter its activities according to the transitions and changes which were introduced every now and then in the society by various ways and means. The centralisation and adoption of uniform and co-ordinated system of administration in the Indian sub continent during the mighty alien colonial period had its own impacts over the native traditional caste system. The growth of education, judicial pursuits and economic institutions has actually crippled the caste system, caste policies as well as their councils. With the installation of the British rule in the Madras presidency, with the commencement of the 19th century many changes gradually crept into the social, political, economic and cultural phases of the then Tamil country. Since the westerners were for the adoption of uniform and codified systems in all aspects, the castes too offered significance to their own caste Panchayats or councils, which were mostly autonomous institutions and had greater influence over the entire people of the caste. Actually no endeavours were made to set aside caste system because it was a deeply permeated social tradition.

During the British period, organisations and institutions such as The Depressed class Union; the Society for Social Service, Social Service League, Poor School Society along with the sayings and services of the prominent National leaders of India awakened the non-Brahmins. Schools and educational centres run by the caste institutions emerged. Every caste was keen on its own promotion by adopting their individual socialisation processes. Subsequently, the caste organisations such as Mahajanasangams and Uravinmurais were established by the castes for the welfare and well being of their castes. When the downtrodden non-Brahmin communities attained a forward and prominent position and elevated status caste revivalism increased. Hence caste system did not wither away. Mainly for promoting the status and position of the community no stones were left unturned. For the uplift and to attain a prominent status by an individual of a particular caste the total uplift of the community was felt quite essential. Welfare Officers and Labour Commissioners were appointed for promoting the conditions of the backward and downtrodden classes. Thus the community feeling

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insisted and encouraged the adoption of numerous ways for its development. This was a common feature among people of all the communities.

The social reformers in improving the general social condition of the poor played vital and a venerable role. In 1859 itself the Shanar women of the South of the peninsular India were allowed to wear Jackets to cover their breast. In 1923 the Government of Madras announced that no grants will be issued to schools or educational institutions which refused to admit children of backward and depressed classes. Promotion through education was utilised as a means to avoid ignorance. For enriching the condition of depressed class in 1923 itself the Village Magistrates were empowered to punish those who opposed the uplift of the downtrodden. In 1925 the Government of Madras enabled all the people of all the communities to utilise all the public facilities entrusted by the Government without any deviation. In 1930-31 the Madras government maintained public streets, markets and tanks by the Corporation Fund for the welfare and benefit of the people of all classes and communities.

The ever improving upward trends created factions among the high and low caste people. The breast cloth movement of 1858, the temple entry movement of 1899 in the Tirunelvely district produced severe and violent communal riots and outbreaks. Such things were responsible for the mass conversion of the Tinnevely Shanars to Christianity. Thus the caste movements of the Ninety and Twenty centuries were particular on achieving or on the preservation of social status of the caste.

Though caste system is condemned vehemently nowadays it is an inseparable aspect of Hinduism. As the colonial period was devoted to social and economic progress, much attention was entrusted to the specialisation of arts, division of labour, choice of occupation. The different communities were branded as executors of specific activities. The concept of caste specialisation emerged and which facilitated the development of an indigenous culture. The society comprised of producers, technicians, manufacturers, labourers, consumers and traders. Caste system assisted the introduction of an unity, solidarity and corporations among people. The caste organisations and councils, which emerged then worked for the maintenance and upkeep of the status and welfare of the people of the society. The caste system even beyond that served as a stepping stone for the uplift of the social status of the caste and community in the society.

The caste system caused drastic changes in different fields of the society. The services of the caste system are mostly harmful to the society because it hinders peace and tranquillity and causes schisms and divisions. The caste system changed or modified the religious attitudes, observances and traditions. The attitudes and outlooks of the people fixed the caste rules and activities. For achieving social recognition and position the members were prepared to give up their age old customs and acknowledged the changes on the basis of modernism. So these individual, national, political and social views were altered and modified. They started moving with the running current for the progress of the society. So caste system became a stabiliser of the social, economic, political and religious spheres.

conclusion

The Caste system prevailing in India, is having its own indigenous origin. The multiplied number of castes is due to their origin from their multifarious occupations. The Tamil society, actually a caste oriented one, had its caste system based on the Varna system. On the basis of occupation various castes subsequently emerged. Each and every group had its own individual traits and qualities. The emigrants to the Tamil country from one region to other regions too formed

separate groups and castes in their migrated areas. It is obvious that the conservative minded and tradition oriented Tamils were unwilling to part with their old values and traditions and they took it as an insult to deviate from the customary practices of any nature. After Indian independence the available divisions such as brahmins and non-brahmins are caste oriented in nature. Even among non-brahmins numerous groups called caste emerged on various grounds and they still survive. The distinctions such as backward, most backward, scheduled castes etc. highlight the caste oriented nature of the Tamils. Even the political parties exploit caste system for their own benefits. Chaos and confusions have crept into the society due to the adoption of the caste oriented politics in Tamil Nadu. No effort is undertaken to realise that caste system has affected the uniform progress in the society. People of all the castes await the government to contribute its best for the uplift and progress of all the castes. In all the social, economic and political arenas various events are taking place on caste grounds. Such is the role of castes in Tamil Nadu which is known for its developed socio-political activities, based on the ever changing trends.

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