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SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: CASTE SYSTEM IN SOUTH TRAVANCORE- A BIRD'S EYE VIEW



T. Samraj

Introduction :

One of the exclusive features of the Indian society is the institution of caste, perhaps the longest surviving social hierarchy in the world. Caste is a defining feature of Hinduism and situates people in complex ordering of social groups on the basis of ritual purity¹. The word, 'caste' owes origin to the Spanish word 'casta' which means 'breed, race, strainer a complex of hereditary qualities. In Portuguese language, the word, 'casta' means lineage, and the Hindu word 'caste' is 'Varna' meaning 'colour'. According to Lundberg, "A caste is nearly a rigid social class into which members are born and from which they can withdraw or escape only with extreme difficulty". In spite of the will and pleasure of individuals, caste implies certain restrictions,

Abstract :

The Indian Caste System has been studied intensively by sociologists, anthropologists and historians, both Indian and European. It is not an easy task to trace its origin, its traditional features, its merits and drawbacks. Indian historians have often provided a religion oriented background, while the European scholars have viewed with some deep-seated prejudice. Several theories have been advanced in explanation of the origin of the caste system. Generally it is viewed that the caste system was a product of the Aryan invasion, which led to the suppression of the native population. Like that of Tamil Nadu, in the modern Kerala Society, there are three broad caste denominations- Brahmins, Non-Brahmins and Lower castes. The most abominable feature of this caste hierarchical system is the position accorded to the lower castes. This unique institution of caste in recent years subjected to a severe condemnation. In this backdrop, this paper seeks to highlight the social stratification that prevailed in the South Travancore region in the erstwhile Princely State of Travancore based on caste system.

Key words : Travancore, Varna, Caste, Class, Hierarchy, Savarbas, Avarnas, Brahmins, Nairs, Nadars, Paraiyas, Pallas, Chuckliyas

code of conduct, rituals, food habits and social status on them². Indian society presents a curious system of segregating sections of society into 'castes or jatis'. It is unique because it is the product of an association of so many circumstances which is not found together elsewhere at any time³. No doubt, Caste is an all Indian phenomenon in the sense because everywhere caste is hereditary and caste groups are endogamous groups which form a hierarchy and that each of group has a traditional association with one or two occupations. The sociologists and anthropologists in general have treated caste and class either as two mutually exclusive categories. Culturally, caste has been conceived in terms of pollution, purity, ritual hierarchy and a feature associated with

Hinduism and it is considered to be different from class⁴.

The origin of caste system can be traced back to the Rig Vedic period. The arrival of Greeks and other Central Asian settlers to India brought the concept of slaves and class division in India. Thus the class system brought by the Aryans are in the line with Plato's ideas of egalitarian society, ie, kings, priests and merchants. After the conversion of Ashoka to Buddhism, it dominated in the Mauryan Empire. Many people embraced Buddhism and Brahmanical religion began to decline. It was Guptas who gave a new life to the Brahmanical religion. The Gupta rulers became the patrons of Brahmanism. They compelled the Buddhists to embrace Hinduism. Even though there are a few groups followed Buddhism strongly, those groups of people who opposed Brahmanism were termed as 'Vrathyas' (Ignoble). The three classes namely kings, priests and merchants were made as Kshatriyas, Brahmins and Vaisyas. The commoners who lived in the kingdom, adopted Brahmanism were termed as Sudras. The castes placed on the upper starta of the social order enjoyed all privileges and the others suffered a lot.

Caste Hierarchy

Travancore State had a typical type of social setup. The society was formulated on the basis of caste system. Varna and Jati are two terms which explains the nature of the institution of the caste⁵. Caste is an elaborate system grounded in Hinduism. It was not merely a social or economic order of the society, but a religious institution. Thus, it had a theocratic foundation and religious sanctions based on the belief that it was a divinely ordained institution⁶. The Aryan model of society pertained in the State viz, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and the Sudras. But it was noticed that there was no Kshatriyas in the erstwhile Travancore State. Besides these castes, the last group of people known as untouchables also resided in the State.

India, the epitome of the world accommodated people belonging to various

castes and creeds. Each community lived according to the principles of their own community and sometimes they are compelled to follow the principles that are directed by the other caste people. The hierarchical caste system with its many attendant evils was brought into India by Brahmins in the early years of history. At first it was landed in North India and had no impact in South India. Immigrants from the North, who had settled at Madurai and in some other cities, sought to introduce Hindu notions of castes and ceremonials, but met with much opposition and the caste system, which for many centuries past, has been observed with special strictness in the south was then inchoate and imperfect. Though the caste system is an all Indian phenomenon, it was unknown in Travancore State in the early years when it was the part of Tamil Country and her people shared with a common culture and heritage⁷. But in course of time, it had a great impact in South India and had a deep root in Travancore State, paved the way for dividing the society into two groups namely 'Savarnas' or the upper caste people and 'Avarnas' or the low caste people. The Savarnas or the upper caste people comprised the groups in the upper section of the society like Brahmins, Nairs, Vellalars and Ambalavasis. The Savarnas or the low caste people who belong to the lower section of the society consisted of the castes like Ezhavas, Nadars, Kammalas, Paraiyas, Pulayars, Parathavars and Pallas⁸.

Brahmins

The Brahmins were seated on the top most position of the social ladder, enjoyed enormous power and privilege in the society as well as in government. They were priests and they had extraordinary control over the kings, and they influenced even the policies of the state⁹. The superstitions of the people had given the Brahmins a blameful sway which was upheld by artifice¹⁰. They devised a well framed system of imposture in order to maintain their

ascendancy over the other castes, and to keep the later in the state of stupidity and ignorance in which they were immersed¹¹. They were exempted from all social and religious disabilities. They were highly educated and well versed in Vedic mantras. They rested on the sweat of the poor slaves and the downtrodden people. They were the owners of the land. Prior to 1960's, Brahmins had a stronghold on the village community and also controlled the land. The legend regarding the land ownership of Brahmins of Travancore was that Travancore was originally reclaimed by the mythical Parasurama who parceled out the reclaimed lands among the limited number of Brahmins. With these lands, the Brahmins became land lords and the lands thus obtained by them were called as 'Janmom' lands and the Brahmin himself was called Janmi. These lands were exempted from paying tax till the janmi posses it. But this idea was contested by modern historians. They contended that the lands originally belonged to the early settlers like Pulayars, Idayars and Nadars¹². But in course of time, the Nair immigrants made an encounter with the original inhabitants and slowly replaced them from power. In this process, they usurped land rights. Hence it has been often claimed that the Nairs were landed proprietors from time immemorial¹³.

Nairs

The enactment of land reforms and abolition of landlordism toppled the hold of Brahmins from the agrarian sector. When the Brahmins lost their land, they entered into service sector. Simultaneously they occupied the higher positions in the service world, especially in the secretariat, electricity board and universities¹⁴. Another important group among the upper caste is the Nairs. They were often called as Sudras. They had a sizable number of populations and they acted as the real rulers of the state and the power vested with them. It is held that they were the off springs of the Brahmins and the Nagas, the early residents of Travancore¹⁵. Their dominance

in all grades is striking¹⁶. Another opinion about the origin of Nairs is that the people who were ready to serve the Brahmins were formed into a new caste, which in turn became their protectors in all respects.

They were also a military group in the erstwhile Travancore State, who formed a feudal aristocracy. Their power was rested in the number of their followers and dependants. The kings and princes submitted to them and in return these people provided military service. Though the Nairs were subordinate to the Brahmins, they dominated over the other castes¹⁷. Their domination inflicted various hardships on the lower castes. Col. Munro stated about the domination of Nairs in his report to the Madras government thus : "No description can produce an adequate impression of tyranny, corruption and abuses of the system full of activity and energy in everything mischievous, oppressive and infamous, but slow and dilatory to effect any purpose of humanity, mercy and justice". Among the Nairs, there are several sub divisions, with their distinguishing titles and characteristics and their respective gradations of caste pre eminence. The four castes like goldsmith, brass workers, blacksmith and carpenters forms the lowest division of the Sudras. The Nairs of Nanjilnad exercised more authority over the southern districts of Travancore than the government itself¹⁸.

Nadars

The next major caste residing in Kanyakumari District is Nadars, who were once known as Shanars¹⁹. The Nadar Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1910 to safeguard the interests of the community and it requested the government to change the name Shanar as Nadar. By considering the request of this organization, the name Shanar was officially changed as Nadar in 1921 by the Madras Government²⁰. The Nadars of Travancore were identical with those Nadars of Tamil Nadu especially Tirunelveli District. They claimed a divine origin and believed themselves to have

been made to carry crowns²¹. There were various opinions about their origin. Robert Caldwell is of the opinion that the Nadars were the immigrants from the northern coast of Ceylon²². He viewed that the Nadars belonged to the highest division of the lowest class or lowest of the middle class. Their employment is the cultivation of Palmyra tree, which they climb daily in order to extract the sap from the flower-stem at the top. The government and the caste Hindus oppressed the Nadars. The then general conditions of Nadars were humiliating and deplorable. Their social condition was so deplorable as that of the slave castes. To mark their degradation, their women were forbidden to wear any clothing whatever above their waist. They were expected to do serve the high caste people and for the temples on free of cost, known as 'Ooliam.' Till Nineteenth Century, their condition was very poor. Raja Rama Row describes that Nadars were inferior to Sudras and superior to Paraiyas²³. They were forbidden from constructing better houses²⁴. But by the influence of Christian missionaries, they became highly educated and rose to a position much more than expected.

Ezhavas

Similarly Ezhavas were very important groups residing in Travancore State. They also experienced the same position of Nadars in the society. Their traditional occupation was cultivating coconut palms and extraction of toddy from it. They also had the occupation of trading and agriculture²⁵. The economic condition of the Ezhavas during the Nineteenth Century showed no promise of improvement as most of the people had to stick on their traditional occupation²⁶. More or less they faced hardships in the society as the Nadars faced. Their aspirations for social and religious development found its fulfillment under the leadership of Sri. Narayana Guru, a great reformer in Kerala.

Subaltern Class People

Besides these groups of people, a section of the society who were termed as 'Dalits'

or 'Untouchables' lived on the outskirts of the society. These sections consist of the castes like Paraiyas, Pulayas, Chakiliyas or Arunthathiar and Pallas. The Brahmins at one end and the Harijans or the Dalits at the other end constitute the two fixed points of the traditional Indian society²⁷. Among the Dalits, the Paraiyas constitute the major population. Most of the Paraiyas were slaves during the Eighteenth and early parts of the Nineteenth Centuries. But there were a few Paraiyas in the south, possessed ancestral property and titles²⁸. Regarding the origin of Paraiyas, different views were held by the scholars. Robert Caldwell derived the name Paraiyas from the Tamil word 'Parai' or 'drum' as certain Paraiyas acted as drummers at marriage, funerals, and village festivals and on occasions when government or commercial announcements were provided²⁹. The view narrated by themselves about their origin is that they belonged to the Pakhanar Vamsam and were the descendents of the Nambuthiri Brahmin. It is believed that they exercised much power and enjoyed a higher position as masters of land in the past. They claim that they ruled over the land in ancient times. In the past, there were many people of repute from this caste such as poets, men of wisdom³⁰. A legend runs to the effect that Vararuchi, the famous astrologer and son of Brahamana named Chandragupta by his Brahmin wife, became the King of Avanti and ruled till Vikramaditya, the son of Chandragupta by his Kshatriya wife came of age and he abdicated the throne in his favour. Once he was resting under an 'ashwastha' tree (ficus religiosa), invoking the support of the deity living therein, he had the conversation of two Gandarvas on the tree to the effect that he would marry a Paraiya girl. He tried to prevent this by requesting the king to enclose the girl in a box and float it down in a river, with a nail struck on her head. Though this was done, Vararuchi finally did marry the Paraiya girl without knowing her identity. When he realized the truth, he

resolved to go on a pilgrimage with his wife, bathing in rivers, worshipping at temples. At last they came to Kerala, where the woman bore his twelve sons, all of whom, except one were taken care by members of different castes. They were all remarkable for their wisdom and believed to be the avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu, gifted with the power of performing miracles. One of them was Pakhanar, who is believed to be the ancestor of Paraiyas. The Paraiyas are distributed in all districts of Kerala and are descendents of those in Tamil Nadu in remote times. The word 'Paraiyan' is not found in Divakaram, a Tamil dictionary of the Eleventh Century A.D. The old Tamil poem and works of the early centuries of the Christian Era do not mention the name Paraiyan, but contains many descriptions of a tribe called Eynas, who seem to have been quite distinct from the rest of the population and did not live in villages but in forts of their own. Ambur and Vellore are mentioned as the sites of two of these. They may perhaps have been the ancestors of the Paraiyas of today.

Pulayas or Cherumans are another important group of Dalit community. The term 'pulaya' is derived from 'Pula' means 'ceremonial pollution', taint or defilement. The Pulayas are otherwise called as Cherumar or Cheruman. According to modern Kerala historians, the word 'Pulayan' did not mean a caste, but it meant cultivator. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai states that the word pulam means field, place or country. Though they became one of the most degraded castes, they are proud of their glorious past. Once they served as rulers also. For instance, a Pulaya princess ruled over Kokkathamangalam, which is a part of Nedumangad Taluk³¹. Similarly a person named Aikkara Yajmanam, whose ancestors were Pulaya kings is held in considerable respect by the Pulayas of the north Travancore and duly acknowledged as their chieftain and lord. Another instance is that one time, the Pulayas had a king of their own who resided in a fort not far off from Trivandrum, the capital city of present Kerala state. The place is now called as 'Pulayanar Kotta',

which means 'Fort of the Pulayas'. But in course of time, they were made as slaves by the higher castes and were brought and sold like cattle and not valued much higher.

The Chakkiliyas were the leather workers, originally from Tamil Districts, corresponding to the Madigas of the Telugu Country⁶¹. In social position, the Chakkiliyas occupy the lowest rank, though there is much dispute on this point between them and the Paraiyans. They have gothra (kilai). They put themselves under Sudra category. This caste is treated low by others. In due course, the nomenclature Chakkiliya was changed as Arunthathias³³.

The Pallas are a class of agricultural labourers, both bonded and free, chiefly distributed in the southern most Districts of Tamil Nadu. ³⁴. They have been spread over certain parts of Travancore State also. Their mother tongue is Tamil³⁵. Their name is derived from the word, 'Pallam' or pit, as they were standing on low ground when their caste was originally found. Another view is that Devendra created them for the purpose of laboring on behalf of the Vellalas. But they were also made as slaves and led a very pitiable life. This caste people led a life of sufferings and sorrows till the later part of the Twentieth Century. The disobedience on their part was tyrannically and subtly punished. They were the most exploited and oppresses class people.³⁶

To conclude, the ancient Travancore society was not based on caste system. The emergence of caste system witnessed with only two broad categories, namely Savarnas and Avarnas. The modern society of South Travancore saw a number castes which are placed in caste hierarchical system. The Brahmins were placed in the tops of the social ladder. The Nairs were considered as warrior class and hence they were brought under the category of Kshatriyas. The Shanars or Nadars are once treated as low caste and now they are successful in business activities and claimed Kshatriya status. The Pallas, Paraiyas, Pulaiyas,

Ezhavas and Chukliyas were treated as bottomline people and were called Sudras.

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