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## ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF CASTE SYSTEM

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### Abstract :

*The Indian caste system has been studied intensively by sociologists, anthropologists and historians. But it is not easy to assess its origin, evolution, its traditional features, its merits and drawbacks. Several theories have been advanced to explain the origin and evolution 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 labour. Some think that the Indian caste system emerged out of totemism. Still there are many theories , concepts , views and opinions of the experts in this field. The modern thinkers poses many views which portrays the gradual emergence and development of the caste system in India. The paper attempts to trace the genesis and growth of the caste system in India and Tamil Nadu. The Left and Right Hand factions were peculiar to the Tamil Country.*

**Key Words:** Caste ,Brahmin, Right Hand and Left Hand, Varna, Conflict, Petition, Black Town, British, Clash, Dispute, Fort St.George, Fort.St.David.

### INTRODUCTION

According to Purushasukta hymn it is believed that the Brahmins arose from the purest part of the Supreme Being namely the mouth of the *purusha* (Brahma) the Supreme Being. Thus the Brahmin in India stands at the apex of the social hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> By his mere birth as a Brahmin, a person is the living embodiment of enjoying religious merit. A Brahmin is entitled to enjoy whatever exists in the world. The whole world is his property and others live on his charity. The Brahmins due to their *acara* (tradition) accepted neither dish nor water from lower castes.<sup>2</sup>

The rivalry among the castes was strong between the Eleventh and the end of the Eighteenth Century. But still the distinction between the two factions exists in the outskirts of villages.<sup>3</sup> However, between Chola times and the late Eighteenth Century, it was an extremely important vertical division of Tamil society P.T. Srinivasa Aiyankar thinks that the division was due to the desire of the lower classes to rise in the social scale or the animosity between the Jains and the Brahmins encouraged such feuds. The English officials who were directly connected with such feuds and conflicts found clearly economic motives behind them.

According to C.S. Srinivasachari, the Hindu population of Madras had for many centuries been divided into two main factions, the Right and Left hand castes, “the members of which were as ready to fall out with one another on the smallest provocation as Orangemen and Ribbonmen were in Ireland , or the Montagues and Capulets of Verona.<sup>4</sup> The Chola inscription says each *varna* was divided into four castes

### Origin of the Caste System



- Origin of the caste system **cannot be established**
- **Many theories** on the origin of castes
- Castes appear to have originated in **northwestern India** among the invading Aryans as a technique to **avoid assimilation** with the dark skinned aboriginals.

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and each caste into six sub castes thus making 24 castes for each *varna* and in total 96 castes. To this one lowest caste the Paraiya was added to the Right hand and Madiga or Chakli to the Left hand.<sup>5</sup> The division was an expression of the separation of the industrial / artisanal castes on the one hand, and the agricultural castes on the other. These castes also represented the aspects of social mobility for; clashes between the castes were frequent, not just too material benefits, but also for symbolic power.

Whatever the origin or nature of the division, the fact was that the division existed. Further, the clashes that arose between the two are sought to be examined in the light of contested terrain. The terrain could be, and often was, physical - i.e. space for houses, processions, etc. It was also over symbols for instance, who had the right to carry what flag, with what emblem, and when. It was also for the affirmation of identity, of legitimacy, and of control over, and /or access to, economic resources.<sup>6</sup>

There were caste conflicts that took place in Madras in 1652, in 1680, and in 1707. The first, that of 1652, in many ways laid out all the areas of contestation. The factors at Fort St. George reported in 1652-1653 that a conflict had broken out in Madras. Writing to the Surat factory, they stated that, historically, there were two "Generall Casts, namely the Belgewarrs (Balijavaju) and the Bereewars (Beri-varu), who, for many hundred years together have ever had a Quarrell one with the other who should bee the more honourable cast. . . ." <sup>7</sup> According to the factors, the entire conflict had been instigated by the Company' merchants who were "indebted to the Company men thousand pagodas more then ever they are able to pay".<sup>8</sup> The conflict was therefore seen as a way for them to evade payment of the debt.

A few years prior to this, two Chettis, Sesadri Nayak and Koneri Chetti, who had been brokers to the Company, had been replaced by two Brahman brothers, Venkata and Kanappa. The latter was also the Adigar (person in charge of native affairs) of Black Town. Thus, the two were extremely powerful, both by way of their links with the British, and their control over the Indian population. Sesadri and Koneri were both members of the right hand caste.

In a petition submitted to the Council at Fort St. George, the members of the right hand claimed that the Brahmans were undermining their position by promoting the interests of the left hand over the right. As the then President of the Council at Fort St. George, Baker, was influenced by the Brahmans, who seem to have been helping him in his private trade, the right were deliberately being denied opportunities for advancement.

Two things are clear from this petition. One is that the British, as early as the 1650, had begun to use their official positions to help their private trade, a tendency that was to increase in later years. The second is that, for the Indians, the British were the source of authority. The latter is perhaps the more important of the two, for it clearly implies the acceptance of authority, irrespective of who exercised it. In other words, it did not matter whether it was the British, or any of the local political powers (like the Nayaks or the Sultans) that was to decide in any dispute. The two caste groups did not feel that the Indian political powers had greater authority. On the other hand, there was awareness that there were other figures of authority to which recourse could be had. However, it was generally accepted that Madras was the British town, and therefore the British had the right to adjudicate.

These castes in Madras were not isolated from the rest of the countryside. On the contrary, the British complained that they had "called in all the country round about of both Casts to fight one against the other, and, corrupting the Towne Watch, have brought in four or five hundred armed men by night." The British also suspected that the local representative of Golconda had a hand in the entire business, for, when they had imprisoned two of the "Ringleaders,..... the Nabob presently. . .Command us to release them againe....." Thus, while the authority of the British in Madras was accepted, there was also, at the same time, the knowledge of an alternative power system. The solution that the British found, at this time, was the division of Black Town. The British assumed that the conflict was not over economic resources, but over living space. An elaborate plan was drawn up, designating streets within which the member of the two castes were to live, and the streets through

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which processions could pass, for weddings and funerals. Anyone found acting contrary to the agreement was to be fined 1,000 dollars.<sup>9</sup> The plan effectively divided Black Town into two, with the left hand occupying the areas to the east of the main street leading out of the fort, and the right hand the areas to the west. Sesadri Chetti, the chief merchant, who in another report was called the instigator of the problems, was, in this division of the town called “mediator to each Caste.”<sup>10</sup>

The details of the clashes of 1652 lay out the areas of contestation very clearly. The first area was space, expressed in terms of which caste lived in what areas, the streets that each could use, and, most importantly, those areas that were common to both. The last included the fort and the street in front of the fort, thus providing access to the source of economic again. Such demarcations also defined that which was forbidden-so, Sesadri Nayak, the Company's servants and Painters were not permitted “to pass these streets”.<sup>11</sup> The second area of contest was noticeable. That of symbols was linked to space, in that the streets for processions were also designated. As flags and banners were carried in such processions, the British hoped that through separation, one area of potential trouble would be nullified. Finally, there was the issue of economic resources. The clash was primarily because one group of merchants felt that they were being denied the opportunities to advance. To bring pressure on the British, they attempted to demonstrate the extent of control they had over, the artisans, and the numbers they could muster from outside Madras. This last included access to the power systems outside Madras, and perhaps all along the coast as well, for Sesadri Nayak was a member of a very powerful family, that of Malaya Chetti. Malaya Chetti and his son, Chinanna Chetti, had been brokers to the Dutch, and had also been powerful at the court of the last Vijayanagara king, Sri Ranga. Thus, the conflict, though actually located in Madras, and appealing to the British as representing authority, at the same time subtly sent out signals that there were other pressures that could be brought to bear on the British.

There was a shift in castes, at least a relegation of the right-left divide to the background. The Chettis apparently competed for control over the artisans - for example, one section of weavers agreed to place themselves under Sesadri's “protection”.<sup>12</sup> The weavers are identified only by occupations, and not as part of right or left, which may indicate that they moved from left to right (Sesadri was part of the right). The petition submitted by the right hand also gives a similar indication, for it says that the “Brahmenees, by their faire promises, gott us to receive employment under them”<sup>13</sup>, even though Brahmans were excluded from the right hand-left hand division, and even though they had come to Madras through the agency of Sesadri.

The first caste dispute involved primarily the merchants, who then drew in the artisans so as to have the advantage of numbers. The next dispute, in 1680, involved mainly the painters.<sup>14</sup> However, again the merchants were involved, though they were rather more in the background. It was reported that the “Painters and other disaffected Persons” had left Madras and gone to San Thome, and were threatening the artisans left in town. The Council at this time decided to hire some “Black Portuguez” and use them to guard the “Washers, who doe as yet stick close to their business,” as well as to “encourage the Painters of the Mallabar Coast”.<sup>15</sup> The painters responded by sending letters to “the severall Casts of Gentues in Towne. . . and threatened several to Murder them. . . .”<sup>16</sup>, and by stooping provisions from entering the town. The British now decided to imprison their wives who were still in Madras, and further, published a list of those involved in the affair. It was proclaimed that, if those involved did not return within ten days, all their goods, houses, etc. would be confiscated. They would then be denied entry into Madras. And would be left “to the kings Governors of the Country to be punished according to their just merit for such their Mutiny and their outrages committed in the Country upon the King's subjects to the disturbance of the kings peace”.<sup>17</sup> By the middle of December 1680, many had returned to Madras.

This conflict was over payments to the painters. However, there was, once again, the issue of debts of the merchants. Two merchants, again former chief merchants, the brothers Pedda Venkatadri and Chinna Venkatadri, were reported to owe a great deal of money to other merchants in Madras. These other merchants complained that because of the pending debts, they themselves were unable to pay the painters. Thus, the painters pulled out of Madras, and with the brothers, and then tried to get the representative of Golconda involved in the affair. The

brothers were apparently part of the right hand, for there is mention of Pedda Venkatadri receiving “a custome of the Gentues . . . for the maintenance of the right hand Dancing Wenches”<sup>18</sup>, but the caste is not mentioned for the painters. Thus again, caste comes to the fore in the context of economic gain or loss, and the artisans, as before, provide the numbers, and in this particular case.

The other notable aspect of this conflict is the issue of authority. Arjun Appadurai<sup>19</sup> has linked the idea of caste conflicts to authority, and has noted that conflicts are often mentioned in the context of weak authority. In the first conflict, the British were themselves divided along factional lines, and so, were unable to solve the problem. In the second, while the British were not divided, and were stronger than before, they did understand, very clearly, that their authority extended only to Madras. Therefore, there was a bifurcation of authority-the king’s justice and the king's peace outside, and the East India Company's justice and peace in Fort St. George. So, threats or action could be taken only against those in towns or their possessions in town- a limited authority and a limited area of justice. When conflicts escalated, or involved a larger geographical region, then the British could be seen as basically helpless. Thus, pressure could be brought on the British by pulling out of town, and thus removing themselves from that area of authority. However, the problem was for economic gain, for such gain was to be had in the port towns.

Therefore these were merely pressure tactics, and were not intended to end all contact with/work for British. This last point is even more clearly visible in the conflict of 1707. In that year, it was reported that caste conflicts had again broken out. This time, they were not limited to Fort St. George, but they had also taken place at “Policat, Nagapatam. Porto Novo and Trincombarr”<sup>20</sup>, and also at Fort St. David. The first two were the Dutch settlements, Porto Novo was an Indian port, Tranquebar was under the Danes, and Fort St. David was the second British fort on the coast. It is significant that the caste conflicts were reported from all those ports that had flourishing trade, for this was a time of drought, famine and war in the rest of South India. Trade was, at this point, perhaps the only source of continuous income.

As in 1652, the merchants were the prime movers, and again, as earlier, the conflict arose from the fact that the left hand seemed to be preferred to the right. The British reported that the Dutch had “turned off the right hand Cast and use the left in their investments... the right hand Cast ow'd the Dutch 40,000 Pagodas. . .”<sup>21</sup> 30 They further stated that the basic cause for the dispute was that the “Old Method of advancing Money on Contract” had been changed. As a result, the right hand was unable to contract for the supply of cloth. They therefore saw the dispute as an attempt to “drive out the heads of the other Casts” so as to regain their position. To some extent, the merchants appear to have been successful, for the factors at Fort St. David reported that the conflict had escalated to such an extent that, at Madras, “they were destitute of Boatmen, Washers, etc. . . . .”<sup>22</sup>

At Fort St. George, the conflict was, again, most frequently expressed in terms of space-living and passing through. As in 1652, the British attempted to solve the problem through demarcating living space. The 1652 settlement was studied, deviations from that settlement outlined, and then re-imposed.

When the left hand castes tried to sell their clothes in open market along with right hand castes, a serious riot erupted in 1707.<sup>23</sup> They quarreled among themselves for petty things, to wear slippers and to ride through the streets in a palanquin or on horse back during marriage festival. Sometimes using of a particular kind of musical instrument will create dispute. Sometimes as indicated by the Census of Madras in 1911 they often were at loggerheads for the right of using twelve pillars in a marriage booth and wearing certain gold ornaments on both arms.

The earlier superficial solution was useless, for conflicts broke out again in 1715. In that year, too, conflicts were reported from other parts of the coast as well, and as in Madras. At Fort St. David, too, there was a demarcation of living areas and streets for processions in 1715.

Thus, the conflicts expose the areas and the levels of contestation. Space was of primary importance. Space was necessarily both physical and economic. Thus, conflict over access to resources was most clearly articulated in conflicts over living space, in the perception of encroachment- i.e., one caste encroaching on the

living space of the other. The British, in the settlement, found that many of the right hand had built houses in the areas designated for the left and vice versa, so they ordered those people to move back to their specific areas in Black Town. They further put up stones as markers of that demarcation.

Addressing the issue of living space provided a temporary solution, but as the main issue, that of access to resources was never addressed, such solutions were necessarily short-lived. Caste then was an expression of the terrain that was being contested. It provided, (i) the security of numbers; (ii) an area for expressing power, in terms of control over numbers; and therefore, (iii) an expression of identity and legitimacy. The legitimate right to be involved in trade belonged to those who had that right earlier, to those whose identity and power were expressed through negotiations with the local and/or the European traders, and so to those who controlled either the artisans, or the production areas. The Chettis who were being replaced belonged to the right hand - therefore, what affected them, affected the entire caste. If they were denied the right to contract for cloth, all those artisans whom they controlled would also suffer. As caste was, not immutable, the Chettis had to assert their control over the artisans, so as to pressurize the British. Identity, though primarily economic, was linked to caste and space. Therefore, the contested terrain was primarily economic, but was most clearly expressed through the medium of caste.

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 1790 a serious riot broke out causing heavy damage. It was brought to the notice of the Governor in Council that in future no flag used by either party during their feasts and ceremonies.<sup>24</sup> In 1809 another dispute arose between these two rival groups regarding what materials could be used during funeral ceremonies of the Pallar who belonged to the left hand group.

They used red cloth, the *teru* (cay) flammers and the betel leaves for the funeral. This was opposed by the Paraiyah on the ground that the Pallar had no right to display such things during their funeral ceremony. In the same year another trouble of the same nature arose.<sup>25</sup> To prevent such frequent flare-ups, George Taswell, the sitting Magistrate of Madras suggested to the Chief Secretary to start an espionage organization of these two castes to maintain peace and order. Up to the middle of the Nineteenth Century, such riots were very common. Thanks to the ceaseless efforts of the Crown after 1858, such quarrels became rare.

To conclude, caste is viewed as an old one. It became a system in the wake of the advent of the Aryans into India. During the Pallava and Chola periods in Tamil Country, it was well saturated. Even the Bhakti Saints considered it an evil practice and advocated for its abolition. During the rule of the British in Madras, Left hand castes were the trading communities and the Right hand castes were the artisans. The heads of the divisions were useful to the British for their control over the natives. In the end of the Nineteenth Century the caste system was systematized and became a permanent features in the India society. By the preparation of Gazetteers and Census Reports, the British brought the entire population under the Caste system. While the Aryans introduced the four varna system, the British in order to perpetuate their rule recorded the caste features and population in the official documents.

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