

Emerging And Development of Tamil Social Structures - A Historical Perspective

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Abstract—The primary objective of this study is to approach the emerging of Tamil society, its evolutionary development, social hierarchies, and the livelihood of marginalized people through various historical evidence. By integrating Sangam literature, land tax structures found in Chola, Pandya, and Pallava period copper plates and inscriptions, protective clauses known as "Ompadaikkilavi," and the travel accounts of foreigners like Megasthenes, this article meticulously analyzes how Tamil society transformed from flexible, eco-regional (Thinai) occupational groups into rigid caste hierarchies and a hegemonic structure over time.

Index Terms—Emerging, sangam literature, Ompadaikkilavi, eco-regional and hegemonic structure.

I. INTRODUCTION

History is not merely about narrating the war victories and genealogies of kings; it is about recording the operational sphere of the working class, marginalized society, and the daily administrative structure. We have various sources, such as literature, foreign travel accounts, copper plates, inscriptions, court records, and colonial documents, that can elucidate the true state of Tamil society with data. However, the reality is that historians have not fully utilized these sources to retrieve the history of marginalized societies (Subaltern History).

Historian S. Jeyaseela Stephen identifies key factors behind the uneven progress of social history research.¹ Because early historical research was pioneered by Marxist scholars, it placed greater importance on economic history. Sociological studies largely narrowed to focusing on village development and the

expansion of caste structures. Although researchers attempted to write a social history centered around farmers, artisans, and merchant guilds by deviating from an excessive focus on royal lineages, there were many difficulties in understanding the operational dynamics of the intricate caste system of Indian society due to the lack of adequate written documents.

Contemporary Social Structure in Foreign Accounts: An Alternative Perspective

The Greek ambassador Megasthenes, who visited India during the Mauryan Empire in the 4th century BCE, profoundly recorded the contemporary social structure in his book "Indica".

He classified Indian society into seven divisions:

- Brahmins
- Cultivators of the land (Farmers)
- Cattle herders and hunters
- Artisans and merchants
- Soldiers
- Spies (Overseers)
- Royal advisors²

When analyzing these records from a sociological and economic perspective, a great truth emerges. Except for the group called 'Brahmins,' all others functioned entirely as occupation-based groups. They did not operate as the rigid birth-based caste system of the present day. Occupations were not mandatorily passed down from parents to the next generation, but were based on individual talent, interest, and societal needs. Megasthenes' notes confirm that in the Indian landscape, particularly in South India, people operated

¹ Jeyaseela Stephen, S., *The Coromandel Coast and Its Hinterland: Economy, Society, and Political System*, Manohar Publishers, 1997, pp. 18–22.

² *INDIA Society, Religion and Literature in Ancient and Medieval Periods*, Publication Division, New Delhi, 2021, p. 2.

purely as economic and administrative groups based on human labor.

II. CULTURAL EXCHANGES AND TRADITIONAL INFLUENCES

Cultural exchange in Indian history is not a one-way path between Aryan and Dravidian traditions; it is a two-way exchange. According to the research of South Indian historian K. K. Pillay, certain social customs that were later intensely observed in Aryan society were fundamentally absorbed from Dravidians.

- Sati (Ascending the funeral pyre):

The practice where a wife sacrifices her life by leaping into the fire upon her husband's death (e.g., The event of Boothapandiyan's wife, Perungoppendu, leaping into the fire, as found in the Sangam literature *Purananuru*).

- Widowhood observances (Nonbu):

The austere lifestyle codes undertaken by women who lost their husbands (eating simple white food, sleeping on the floor without a mat).

- Tonsure:

The custom of widows shaving their heads bald. K. K. Pillay argues with historical evidence that these were not native customs of the Aryans, but were adopted by them from Dravidian society as a continuation of Aryan-Dravidian intermingling.³

III. SANGAM ERA ECO-REGIONAL SOCIETY AND OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

In ancient Tamil society, the birth-based Varnashrama caste system was not present initially. Instead, people

were divided into groups based on geography (Kurinji, Mullai, Marutham, Neithal, Palai) and their occupations.

To substantiate this, K. K. Pillay, citing ancient Tamil literature such as *Tolkappiyam* and *Silappatikaram* as evidence, lists occupation-based social divisions including Thudiyar, Panan, Paraiyan, Kadamban, Velalar (farmers), Vanigar (merchants), Vinaivalar (artisans), and Adiyar (laborers).⁴

When Mangudi Maruthanar sings about social clans in the Sangam literature *Purananuru* (Poem 335), he declares: "There are no other clans but these four: Thudiyar, Panan, Paraiyan, and Kadamban."⁵

Here, divisions such as Thudiyar (player of the Udukkai drum), Panan (one who plays the Yazh and sings), Paraiyan (player of the Parai drum), and Kadamban were purely occupational and art-based groups integrated with daily life.⁶ Even though Professor K. A. Nilakanta Sastri refers to them as "castes,"⁷ modern historians view them solely as occupational divisions.

Furthermore, *Ahananuru* mentions four occupational divisions: Parathavar (fishermen), Uzhavar (farmers), Kuravar (hunters/gatherers), and Maravar (warriors).⁸ *Paripadal* goes even further and lists 44 types of occupational practitioners⁹ (e.g., salt merchants, artisans/blacksmiths, potters, carpenters, elephant mahouts, washerwomen). Although it refers to these occupations as "Kulam" (clan/lineage), they did not constitute a system that imposed inequality during the Sangam period.

IV. POST-SANGAM ECONOMIC CRISES AND SOCIAL CHANGES

The post-Sangam Kalabhra period and the subsequent Pallava period (up to Simhavarman, 580-586 CE)

³ Pillai, K. K., *Tamil Nadu History: People and Culture*, International Tamil Research Institute, Chennai, 2000, pp. 150–165.

⁴ Pillai, K. K., *South Indian History*, Palaniappa Brothers, Chennai, 2011, p. 58.

⁵ U.V. Saminathaiyar (ed.), *Purananuru: Text and Commentary*, Dr. U. V. Saminathaiyar Book House, Chennai, 2000, p. 497 (verse no. 335).

⁶ Ilampuranar, *Tolkappiyam – Porulatikaram*, Tirunelveli South India Saiva Siddhanta Works Publishing Society, Chennai, 1961, pp. 222–226 (sutras: 71, 72, 78, 81).

⁷ Nilakanta Sastri, K. A., *A History of South India: From Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 131.

⁸ Subrahmanian, N., *Sangam Polity: The Administration and Social Life of the Sangam Tamils*, Ennes Publications, Madurai, 1980, pp. 265–268.

⁹ Saminathaiyar, U. V. (ed.), *Purapporul: Text and Purananuru Commentary* (verse no. 10), Dr. U. V. Saminathaiyar Book House, Chennai, 1956, pp. 92–96.

sowed the seeds for major social changes in Tamil Nadu. Property damage caused by continuous wars and the confiscation of farmers' lands caused poverty to spread.¹⁰

As a result, post-Sangam literature such as the Pathinenkilkanakku (Eighteen Lesser Texts) and Buddhist and Jain epics (Manimekalai, Silappatikaram) highly praised charitable acts like eradicating the disease of hunger and providing shelter. The text "Yapparungalam" warns that kings should not confiscate farmers' lands to reward soldiers, and if they do, the subjects will suffer.¹¹ This highlights the challenges faced by farmers within the land tax and administrative structure of that time.

During this period, merchants known as "Chetti" emerged as a prominent, distinct group. Both Silappatikaram and Manimekalai have recorded their prosperous lives.¹² K. K. Pillay classifies marginalized laborers such as shepherds, potters, carpenters, and washermen as "Shudras". However, Jeyaseela Stephen firmly refutes this, stating that neither the Sanskrit term "Shudra" nor its concept was in use in Tamil society during the Sangam or post-Sangam periods.¹³

V. VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION AND MARGINALIZED LABORERS

During the Pallava and Early Chola periods, village administration evolved into an autonomous institution. In traditional Tamil settlements, 12 types of servants were functional.

The entire economic production of the village was built upon the shoulders of this lower-stratum laboring society, which included the village headman, accountant, blacksmith, goldsmith, carpenter, potter, water overseer, watchman, washerman, barber, and

Sakkiliyar.¹⁴ The roots of the 12-type village servant system (Ayagar system)¹⁵, which reached its full form during the Vijayanagara period, were already found in the traditional Tamil settlements of the Early Chola period. Those who determined the entire production of the land-owning society were eventually transformed into bonded laborers tied to the land and powerless marginalized people over time.

VI. TEMPLE ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL HEGEMONY

During the Later Chola and Pandya periods, temples transformed not merely into places of worship but into the largest landowners, banks, and centers of social power. Regarding temple administration, specific qualifications were defined to perform sacred duties.

Inscriptions emphasize three primary qualifications required to become temple servants such as Sribhandaram, Thiruparisaragar, and Karanathar:

- Bhoomi Sampathu: Owning land rights.
- Bandhu Sampathu: Having royal and high-status relatives.
- Artha Sampathu: Being a wealthy person possessing gold and material wealth.¹⁶

These rules prevented common people and marginalized individuals from entering temple administration.

Furthermore, an unwritten rule prevailed that only Brahmins should be appointed as "Sribhandaris." This confirms that temple wealth and administration operated under the absolute hegemony of landowning, upper-class society.

¹⁰ Mahalingam, T. V., *South Indian Polity*, University of Madras, Madras, 1955, pp. 382–385.

¹¹ Amithasagarar, *Yapperunkalam*, C. Bavanantham Pillai (commentator), Macmillan & Co., Chennai, 1916, p. 426.

¹² Elangovadikal, *Silappatikaram: Text and Adiyarku Nallar Commentary*, U. V. Saminathaiyar (commentator), Dr. U. V. Saminathaiyar Book House, Chennai, 1927, pp. 384–386; Seethalai Sathanar, *Manimekalai*, U. V. Saminathaiyar (commentator), Kabir Press, Chennai, 1921, pp. 45–50.

¹³ Jeyaseela Stephen, S., *Caste in Tamil Nadu: Structure, Practice and Before the 1871 Census of British India*, New Century Book House, Chennai, 2024, p. 22.

¹⁴ Karashima, Noboru, *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions A.D. 850–1800*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 46–51.

¹⁵ Mahalingam, T. V., *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar*, Part I, University of Madras, Madras, 1969, pp. 226–231.

¹⁶ Nilakanta Sastri, K. A., *The Colas*, University of Madras, Madras, 1955, pp. 653–655.

VII. EPIGRAPHICAL EVIDENCES: LAND ENDOWMENTS AND PRESERVING DHARMA

In the economic, social, and administrative history of Tamil Nadu, the copper plates and inscriptions issued by kings and chieftains serve as primary sources. Endowments such as Brahmadeyam (land granted to Brahmins), Devadhanam (land granted to temples), and Pallichantham (land granted to Jain and Buddhist institutions) reveal the land tax and landownership changes of that era.¹⁷

When inscribing such land grants on copper plates, it is customary to note the donor's genealogy, meikeerthi (eulogy), and the reason for the grant, followed finally by inscribing the meritorious benefits for those who protect the grant and curse phrases for those who destroy it.

According to the Shastras, Kannigadhanam (giving a maiden in marriage), Godhanam (gifting cows), and Bhoodhanam (gifting land) were considered the highest forms of charity. The title deeds encouraged that those who continuously protected a king's charity without any hindrance would attain merit equivalent to performing "a crore of Kannigadhanams" and numerous Ashvamedha Yagnas.

VIII. OMPADAIKKILAVI: SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND LEGAL PROTECTION

In epigraphy, the curse phrases used at the end of copper plates to threaten those who usurp land grants or violate the king's order are known as "Ompadaikkilavi". In the copper plates of the Chola, Pandya, and Nayakar periods, these are recorded in extremely intense language.

The Ganges was considered the most sacred river in India, and the Karam cow was considered the most sacred creature. The destroyer of the grant was warned that he would incur the "Gohathya (sin of cow slaughter) dosham of killing a Karam cow on the banks of the Ganges".

Some title deeds threatened even more severely, stating they would "incur the sin of killing their mother

and father on the banks of the Ganges" or "incur the Brahmahatya (killing a Brahmin) dosham of killing a Brahmin at Cape Comorin".¹⁸

IX. HISTORICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In those times, which lacked robust security and judicial systems like police departments or prisons similar to the modern era, such religious threats alone sustained royal commands and charitable edicts for many centuries.¹⁹

There was a practice of excommunicating violators of dharma from society by branding them as "Siva Drohi" (Traitor to Lord Shiva), "Grama Drohi" (Traitor to the Village), or "Swami Drohi" (Traitor to the Master). Ompadaikkilavis were not merely ritualistic phrases; they are excellent documents demonstrating how the state legally upheld its land rights and revenue administrative orders by intertwining them with religious beliefs and social psychology.

X. CONCLUSION

Ancient Tamil society began its historical journey strictly as flexible, eco-regional occupational groups devoid of birth-based inequalities, valuing labor and skill. However, the subsequent Aryan cultural admixture, continuous wars, land grants by kings (Brahmadeyam, Devadhanam), and agricultural expansion gradually transformed this society into a rigid social hierarchy over time. When everything from temple administration to village administration became concentrated in the hands of landowners, the true laborers were pushed to the margins. The state successfully utilized psychological and religious tools like "Ompadaikkilavi" to retain social power. When deeply examining literature, foreign accounts, inscriptions, and copper plates in an integrated manner, this multifaceted, contradiction-filled historical evolution of Tamil society becomes very clear. It is the need of the hour that future historical research must travel in a direction that moves beyond

¹⁷ Kasinathan. Natana., *Pandya Inscriptions Ten*, Tamil Nadu Government Archaeology Department Publication, Chennai, 1992, pp. 12–16.

¹⁸ Resu. S., *Epigraphy*, International Tamil Research Institute, Chennai, 1980, pp. 85–88.

¹⁹ Subbarayalu, Y., *Tamil Nadu Inscriptions*, Tamil University Publication, Thanjavur, 2004, pp. 22–26.

kings and wars to retrieve the economic and social contributions of the grassroots and marginalized people.

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