

Bhakti and Tamil Society

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ABSTRACT

The history of Tamil Nadu presents a succession of real, concrete societies such as the ‘Sangam, Pallava and Chola’. The present article examines the role of Bhakti Movement in shaping the conduct of the individuals who made up each successive society. In the field of religion one has find out the truth amidst Vedic oriented, Sanskrit aided, Brahmanic coined, canonic formed, Pallavan ushered and Nayanmar nurtured Saivism seeping peacefully under the Pallavas and later under the Cholas. The paper will evaluate the Sangam period as the transitional stage in the evolution of the life of the Tamils from the pre-historic period to the historic period. However, this continuity in evolution suddenly changes with the emergence of ethical works in the post-Sangam period

KEYWORDS: Sangam, Pallava, Chola, Bhakti Movement, Nayanmar, Ethical Works.

Human society is a complex entity. Every individual is connected with a definitive culture, which moulds his cast of mind and activity and which remains relatively unchanged over centuries and even millennia but each ‘culture’ is so original that it warrants special attention.

History of mankind is coherent with each people going through a number of law-governed stages in its historical advance. However, every society is not a haphazard conglomeration of diverse social phenomena but coherent systems whose elements interacts and are fundamentally interconnected.

The history of Tamil Nadu presents a succession of real, concrete societies such as the ‘Sangam, Pallava and Chola’. These are examined with the purpose of elucidating the role of Bhakti-movement in shaping the conduct of the individuals who made up each successive society. In the field of religion one has find out the truth amidst “Vedic oriented, Sanskrit aided, Brahmanic coined, canonic formed, Pallavan ushered and Nayanmar nurtured Saivism seeping peacefully under the Pallavas and later Cholas”.¹

The Sangam period is the transitional stage in the evolution of the life of the Tamils from the pre-historic period to the historic period. Sangam literature (Pattu and Tokai Nulka) deals with the contemporary life as well as the remnants of the life that had preceded. The confidence of the Tamils to live a full mature and rich life is remarkable. This confidence is best understood

against the background of the organisation of society. Ancient Tamil society was essentially a tribal organisation. It is remarkable that even when caste had become a distinctive feature of that society, its tribal nature persisted.²

Development of society relies on the development of technical know-how and the ancient society of the Tamils moved slowly but steadily towards agriculture dry or wet, from hunting food gathering and cattle rearing phases.

Since the poems are not acceptably stratified, evolution is difficult to trace. Like all the primitive societies the Tamils were accustomed to totems, tutelary trees, Bali (sacrifice) and rituals. With passing times magic disappeared but rituals continued to hold sway. Chronologically later states took shelter under these rituals to link themselves with divinity and thereby enabled Burton Stein to talk of 'Ritual Sovereignty'.³

In personal life it seems to be an Age of Freedom. How far and how much 'Aryan influence' is penetrated is an interesting question. The terms 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' are not to be taken as racial but territorial, not as an ethnic stock nor a linguistic group. It should be noted that even after the establishment of the kingdoms, Tamil was not the sole language of the land; it was the major language. The "older tribal polity evidencing a large number of horizontally cut up kinship groups with their peculiar system of endogamy and ritual taboos existed intact in the South and the Varna system was a coat put on this ancient structure thereby creating a social criss-cross both horizontal and vertical and very clearly the system functioned in the most peculiar way.⁴ This horizontal and vertical schism made 'Regnum' independent and 'Sacerdotum' influence administration.

Superior Vellalar enjoyed Jus Connubium with the royalty.⁵ Merchants and traders largely belonged to the cities. Goldsmiths were treated as low born. The social fabric was woven with a large substratum of hilly forest" and coastal tribes with their own religious practices and dietic and sartorial habits, poor workmen, casual labourers and agriculturists of villages and the more advanced sections of the society like Brahmins, Kings, chieftains, local bards and landlords (kilar). In urban localities 'Yavanas' were present, Untouchability and even Unapproachability was practised.

The emphasis on impermanence and encouragement of Brahmins are expressed in the anthology Purananuru.⁶ The ancestors of Kauniyan- Vinnaththayan performed Vedic- sacrifices ignoring the views of heretical sects. T. K. Velu Pillai quotes K.A. Nilakanta Sastri to emphasise the role of Kaundinya gotra in spreading Brahmanic culture in Tamil Nadu and Southeast Asia. Verse 362 of the Anthology Purananuru clearly portrays the waning influence of the heroic life of the Tamils. It characterises the transition from the tribal to the civilised way of life.

This picture suddenly changes with the emergence of ethical works in the post-Sangam period. The post Sangam age witnessed the rise of the Kalabhras in the political arena. The rulers and the ruled belonged to different cultural milieu, the ruled having the fascination for the rulers. To

solve this illusionary fascination ethical works arose which impose lot of restrictions on the day-to-day life of the people. During the reign of the Kalabhras, Jainism and Buddhism were terrible forces to reckoned with.⁷

‘Varna-dharma’ continued in a different form during the time of the Pallavas. “Why the Tamil society accepted it?” is a question that commands attention. The reason appears to be geopolitical. Had there been continuity of space beyond Cape Camorin or had the Peninsula part of India been not as small as it is, it would have been difficult to get social sanction. That the Varna-dharma is here in India alone is a positive truth in support of this view. Varna-dharma percolated from the north to Cape Camorin and the sea proved a formidable obstacle for its east-ward and west-ward march.

When all the rulers elsewhere in India accepted it, the Tamils could not have resisted it for a long time. When the people themselves showed a holier than thou attitude Brahmins became the cultural transmitters. It provided security to the ruling house that was legitimised by the Brahmins who attributed Kshatriyar origin to South Indian dynasties. The ethical works fertilised the soil for rearing Varna-Dharma.

Early Pallava rulers enforced special rules for perpetuating caste. Kurram record of Paramesvaravarman and the Kasakudi and Pullur copper-plates of Nandivarman bear testimony that several Brahmins followed Apastamba pravachana in their religious rites and ceremonies but there were internal divisions among the brahmin such as Vaishnava, Saiva and Vedic Brahmana.⁸

From the Pallava period, we come across a number of Brahmadeya land grants. Brahmins also entered into secular vocations. They found employment in Temple as priests, cooks accountants and karnatans. They served different committees (Variums) for tanks, fields, garden and famine relief (Panchavara). There appears to have been a general prejudice for a Brahmin to undertake physical labour such as ploughing in the field.⁹

In tribal areas the Brahmins were granted land and the tribal peasantry learnt the value of preserving the cattle and methods of agriculture.¹⁰ But, here under the Pallavas the Brahmin was the receiver of Royal gift. A cursory look at the pre - Pallavan society and the society under the Pallavas would show the changes effected with the march of time. In this change Burton Stein perceives “Orthogenic elements including Tamil language, territorially segmented people under tribal chieftains, folk religious beliefs and practices reflecting territorially segmented culture and a certain degree of urbanisation in a few widely separated core areas of advanced agrarian and commercial organisation.”¹¹

Sangam society was not priest dominated. In the Pallavan society, the priests were important forces to be reckoned with. Although being a part of the society, the Brahmins felt apart from it.

That there was considerable mobility among the members of the community, among the members of the caste during the Pallava age is attested by the fact that Saivite and Vaishnavite Saints belonged to all castes .¹²

Brahmanism was the basic structure over which the upper structure of the Bhakti or devotion was imposed. The musings of the Nayanmars and Alvars are to be viewed against this background. Appar was a sincere devotee of Siva even if he happens to be a Pulaiya.¹³ He was against kula, gotra and sastra and for a bhakta , the sacred thread is not necessary.¹⁴

The disciple of Sambandar was Tiruneelkantar of the Panar caste. Sundarar's inter-caste marriage with a dancing girl was tolerated. Manikkavasakar praises God as one who rescued him from the whirlpool of caste and subcaste in which he was struggling.

There was no prohibition of inter-dining and inter- marriage among Saiva saints. Sambandar, a Brahmin dined and lodged with Appar, a Vellala. Enadi Nayanar, the Sanar, Kannappar, the hunter, Adi Paththar, the fishermen, Anayar and Tirumular, the shepherds, Tirukripu- Tondar, the washer man and Nandanar, the Pulaiyar were all low-caste men. Throughout his work on Cholas, K.A.Nilakanta Sastri emphasises on the theme of social harmony which is difficult to accept in the context of contemporary Tamil society. The theological wrangles, the crusades of the Alvars and Nayanmars, the reformist movement spearheaded by Shankara, Ramanuja and Madhava and polarisation of the Tamilian society into Varnas call for a deeper probe.

After the Bhakti movement the land was filled with temples that housed the deities. Priesthood was instituted to provide the masses with spiritual sustenance in the sacraments to lead worship and to provide advice on spiritual matters. In Chola society in post-Bhakti period, Burton Stein recognises the caste principles of hierarchy and inequality, the vulnerability of low caste artisans to be crushed to the status of deprivation and economic exploitation.¹⁵

Tension is manifested in the reported Valankai and Idankai conflict that plagued the Chola society. The motivational background of such conflict might be the consciousness on the part of the social group that was slowly but steadily losing its legitimate rights.

With the construction of structural temples the Kammalas rose in the social ladder.

In the Sangam period even the Goldsmith was considered low. During the Chola times , society was under the spell of rituals, the rise of artisan class met with the resistance at the hands of the agricultural peasants. Vanikar as a social group lost their importance. Their place was usurped by craft guilds and merchant guilds whose area of operation was wide. They had diverse ethnic elements. Such conflicts are significant.

K.R. Hanumanthan observes “ it was owing to this anxiety to preserve their status in the society that a large number of castes which could not be accommodated in the Verna system began to

align themselves artificially with two groups called Valankai and Idankai whereby they claimed certain distinct privileges for themselves”.¹⁶

The possible and probable causes for the emergence of right hand and left-hand castes were “temples building and military activities, immigration and emigration.

Upper classes encouraged lower classes to fight among themselves so that they could retain superior status in society.”¹⁷

The period of Kulottunga III appears to be the age in which differentiation of the Tamil society into Right and Left assume great importance. Kammalas designated as Anulomas, were allowed to in due course to wear sacred thread sans Mantra Deeksha.”¹⁸

The Goldsmiths too rose in status. They were allowed to use double conches, footwear on journey and white washing their houses.¹⁹ Similar privileges extended to Anuloma Rathakara caste.²⁰ From the Aduthurai Inscription, we understand that the Brahmins and Vellalas and agricultural tenants like Vanniyars were not well disposed towards the left hand castes.²¹

The right hand and left hand were prevented from common worship in Temple Mandap at Kanchipuram.²² Even the Brahmins were drawn into the conflict.”The dispute was over the use of Garuda banner.” Vikrama Chola Deva settled the case in favour of Brahmins.²³

The point appropriate to us is that the Valankai generally exhibited a pro-Prince attitude . It was an important component of the militia during the time of Raja Raja I. Their solidarity is unique “if a new community wanted to be included in the Tamil society, it had to accept the supremacy of the Vellalas, their kings and Brahmin gurus and it was then automatically admitted into the Valankai classes. If not, it was assigned a lower status in the society among the Idankai classes.”²⁴ The solidarity of the Idankai classes is revealed by inscriptions.²⁵

An inscription from Porur Temple near Coimbatore issued during the period of Vikrama Chola, the Kongu king, during the 13th century, records the contributions made by the members of the military establishments for the worship of Idankai Nayaka. The name of the God suggests that the establishment was set up for worship by the members of the Idankai class.²⁶ The composition of the right and left divisions had varied according to the exigency condition which brought them into being and the lapse into latency with the passing of that condition. Perhaps about the ninth century A.D. various sub-divisions among the Vellalas appeared.

A probe into the history of the Vellalas would reveal they were not vegetarians in the beginning. To sanskritise themselves and to ascend the social ladder they had avoided non-vegetarian food. Kamban the celebrated author of the Ramayana in Tamil, give them a super status above that of the Brahmins, Kings and merchants.²⁷

We have enumerated the reaction against the caste hierarchy and assumed superiority of the Brahmins. Despite the efforts of the religious leaders and the vehement onslaughts did not touch

even the fringe of the problem. Though Jainism and Buddhism were Non-Vedic, they had retained some features of the social organisation of the people including caste. The caste concept had become natural. Two important points have to be noted about the concept of caste in Tamilnadu.

1. The fourth caste was called Vellalars probably to remove the stigma attached to the words Sudra. For that matter there was no class of people exclusively engaged in labour or in rendering service to others. Those there were, had been included in the previous classification of people under the regional Tinais (physiographical land divisions) who seem to have been outside the four classification. The function of trade and agriculture were shared by 'Vanikar' and 'Vellalar',

2) The second important point is the giving of the first place on the rank of primacy in the hierarchy to 'Arasar' (Kshatriyas) and not to the Brahmins. Thus the life process of the Tamils under the Cholas exhibits the susceptibility of human beings to react to strong currents of economic and religious contingencies.

The Brahmin community had also internal divisions like Shivachariyar (Gurukkal), and Vaishnavas. The Sivacharyas were not in favour of sacrifices. They gave importance to 'Siva mantra' where as the Vedic Brahmins laid stress on 'Gayatri mantra'.

Thurston says that Gurukkals are more probably of Tamil origin and they originally belonged to the great Vaisya branch of Manu's four-fold system of caste and they migrated from the Pandya country and the Gurukkal observe most of the religious ceremony of the Brahmins.²⁸ The Sivacharyas gained an upper hand over Vedic Brahmins as temple-priests.

An institution that was an ingredient of Chola society was 'slavery'. Rajendra by using lacks of soldiers made a lot of people particularly woman prisoners and in the dining hall of the Cholas there were three thousand woman guarding the hall by turn duty from among them, according to Holtur inscription.²⁹

In the time of Kullotunga I three Vellalas sold their daughters along with their descendants to the temple at Thiruvakkarai.³⁰ Many such references could be given to prove the point of existence of slavery.

The condition of the slaves was far from satisfactory. Temples were not keen on protecting the slaves. The sale deed witnessing the sale of slaves is called 'Alvilai Pramana Isaivu- Cheettu.' The Accountants of the Kayarohans Swamy temple at Nagapattinam using the Isaivu Cheettu sold the woman slaves in their possession to the temple at Suramangalam.³¹

The Bhakti saint Sundarar, however, expresses the doubt whether a Brahmin could be a slave. Absconding slaves were rescued and put to work again.³² Mathas too owned slaves.³³ Shivasubramaniam's view that slaves are 'slaves of God' cannot be accepted.³⁴

Chola temples were not merely temples of worship but also centres of immense wealth. The efforts of Ramanuja to better the lives of slaves did not succeed.³⁵

Thus, the social picture of post-Bhakti era gives the impression that the hymnist's success in this direction was marginal.

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