

## Social Divisions in Kongu Region

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### ABSTRACT

*In social set up, Tamils witnessed caste segregation, economic disparities and religious variations. Based upon Varna system, the Aryans divided the society into four classes, viz., the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaiyas and the Sudras. With the coming of the Aryans into South India the already existing indigenous divisions and subdivisions, based upon occupation of the society came to be amalgamated with these fourfold divisions. The Brahmins who occupied good position in the society made their children to get all kinds of education. Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Dharmapuri Districts belong to the west zone where Puplic are living in villages engaging in agriculture. The Puplic of Coimbatore District were the pioneers in introducing modern inputs in agriculture.*

**Keywords:** Society - Brahmins – non Brahmins – Mudaliars- Vellalars - Chettairs- Nairs- Naidus- Reddys- Naicks and Kammalas.

### Introduction

In social set up, Tamils witnessed caste segregation, economic disparities and religious variations. Based upon Varna system, the Aryans divided the society into four classes, viz., the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaiyas and the Sudras. With the coming of the Aryans into South India the already existing indigenous divisions and subdivisions, based upon occupation of the society came to be amalgamated with these fourfold divisions. Yet this Aryan system did not completely overcome the existing class structure in the Tamil region. With the passage of time of the fourfold system which mingled with the social divisions, the Tamils came to be classified into three Primary divisions viz., the Brahmins, the caste- Hindus and the depressed classes.

### Classification of the Society

The Brahmins who were in upper strata of the society occupied an eminent position in the society. The Brahmins were only three percent of the population of the Madras Presidency and resided at the place known as *Agrahara*. They have a long tradition of Sanskrit learning. They were noted for highly conservative nature and supremacy. They were divided into a number of endogamous groups and were not evenly settled down in madras Presidency. Nearly half of the Tamil Brahmins lived in the three districts of Thanjavur, Thiruchirapalli and Tirunelveli. Thanjavur was considered to be the citadel of the community. About nine percent of the total population, of Thanjavur was Brahmins. In Tamil Nadu there were two broad

categories of Brahmins, namely, Iyers and Iyengars and among the occupational Tamil Brahmins there were the Vedic Brahmins, domestic Brahmins and temple priests. In the Malabar region of the Madras Presidency, the Tamil Brahmins and the Malabar Brahmins better known as Nambudris and enjoyed higher status. The temple priests played a vital role in the society. They regulated religious life and mingled with the people in the day-to-day activities.

The Reorganization of the administrative system in the nineteenth century gave a lot of opportunities to the Brahmins to improve their standard of life. They became the elite and administrative groups of the Tamil society. In course of time, they occupied a dominant and privileged position in the social setup. They led a luxurious and convenient life at home while the other caste were tilling the soil or engaging in trade activities. The Brahmins gave their *lands* to the non-Brahmin tenants for lease and they also cultivated the lands with the help of the labourers. Thus the Brahmins got income from the landed property and temple assets.

### **Brahmins**

The Brahmins who occupied good position in the society made their children to get all kinds of education. As a result, they got postings in the administration, and their exodus, to towns started. Further, as they were considered an elite class, they got involved in the political activities and influenced the masses highly.

All the socio- political and religious activities were dominated by the Brahmins which was highly responsible for the aggravation of the caste system in Tamil Nadu. The growth of anti-Brahmanism compelled the Brahmins to seek anonymity, which only large amorphous metropolitan crowds could provide.

### **Non -Brahmins**

The Caste- Hindus placed next to the Brahmins in the social strata. Among them, Mudaliars, Vellalars, Chettairs, Nairs, Naidus, Reddys, Naicks and Kammalas gained great influence over the society. They were called non-Brahmin caste – Hindus. Among the caste- Hindus, the Nairs were considered caste Hindus in Malabar region. The Vellala was highly respected and was an influential caste among the non- Brahmin caste – Hindus.

There are several categories of the Vellalas, such as Thondaimandalam Vellalas (Saiva Vellalas), karkartavellalas, Nanchinadu Vellalas, Kongu Vellalas, etc. Invariably, they were land.

## **Vellala**

‘Vellala’ the word in Tamil denotes ‘cultivator’. Simultaneously it also denotes a major caste spread out in all the areas of the Tamil country, i.e., Thodaimandalam, Cholamandalam, KonguMandalam and Pandya Mandalam and subdivided on territorial basis, and then further divided into numerous sub- castes. The outstanding feature of this case is that the members are large scale landowners and cultivators whose ownership goes back in time. Historically, the Vellalas were linked to a group of chieftains and petty chiefs called Velir, the earliest references to whom are found in the Sangam anthologies. Since the beginning of the Christian era up to the Muhammadan invasion in the Fourteenth Century A.D. the vellalaa played roles of varying importance.

Even though the centralized political power in Tamil country weakened from the fourteenth century, due to alien invasions, the aliens associated themselves with the indigenous elite group – the Vellalas. The seventeenth century Mandala Satakampoems (5 or 7 of which are devoted to extolling the past glories of Vellalas) are interpreted as ideological statements of an ancient and continuing though challenged, dominance of Tamil Vellalas. A series of inscription at Vikramasingapuram, Courtallam, Kanyakumari, etc. point to yet another Vellala family associated with Government in Tirunelveli Principality. Vadamalaiyappa Pillaiyam, a KarkattaVellala from Kayanur in Madurai district is mentioned as Karyattu- K-Karttar (agent for administration) to TirumalNayak. Renovation and construction of temple at Tentirupperai, Titukkolor, Sankarankoil, Knyakumari, Tiruchedur and Courtallam are attributed to him.

The Vellalas, as administrative motif, recurs often in the family and state histories of the numerous Palayappattus and Zamins in this area. For example, Chokkampatti, Sivagangai, Ettaiyapuram, Panjalankurichi, Ramanathapuram, etc. in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Vellalas were considered a powerful local caste.

## **Maravas**

The Maravas were warriors caste and not interested in agriculture or trade. Their economic base is smaller vis-a-vis the hostilities between Telugu and Marava Poligars, Vellalas were uniformly sought out by both blocs for key ministerial assignment. The Saiva Vellalas known for vegetarianism occupied a decent place in the society. They had good education and entered the government jobs in various categories. Besides, they engaged in ploughing operation which fetched them a considerable income from agriculture and increased their economic and social status on par with Brahmins. They established their individuality and identity in their social ceremonies by not inviting the Brahmins, the usual practice of other

caste people. The other Vellals lived throughout Tamil Nadu but they were not of the status equal that of Saiva Vellalas in the society.

### **Mudaliars**

Mudaliars are another example of the Indian penchant for diversity in community. There are the Arcot Mudaliars, Vellore Mudaliars, Poonamalle Mudaliars, Senguntha Mudaliars. They were all grouped under the generic name of Vellalar at one time or another. In Tamil country, Vellalar was the common name for people who engaged in agriculture. They were next to Brahmins in hierarchical terms, though the Arcot Mudaliars considered themselves decidedly superior to Brahmins. Perhaps they distinguished themselves in education and generally in Anglophilia it was a location (Vellore) or occupation (Seng-untha- silk weaving) that made for sub-divisions in course of time.

‘Mudaliar’ is a term that means the first-rank person, the leader or the chief. This community is not intimidated by the airs of those above or the assertions of those below. But they are subject to the same influences that impinge on all communities in India. The Thondaimandala Mudaliars belonged to Thondainadu, also known as Thondaimandalam. Kancheepuram was its capital city. The Ekambareswarar Temple there was the place of worship of the Thondaimandalam Mudaliars. The story began with Karikalacholan clearing the dense forest area around Kancheepuram, and settled there about 48,000 Vellala families from the present Tiruchirappalli, Thanjavur and South Arcot regions.

The Mudaliars were highly cultured and staunch Saivaites. One group among them tilled the fields with sweat of their labour. Another group employed labour to work in the lands owned by them. They were also given to intellectual pursuits, saints, spiritualists, chieftains, administrators and thinkers from their ranks. The social transformation that took place in this community over the years can be witnessed at the life histories of the outstanding figures it has produced. The spiritual scholar, Sekkilar, the author of Periyapuram (a biographical account of sixty – three Shaivite Nayanmars) was named Arulmozhi. What Arulmozhi Sekkizhar was in the world of scholarship, Ariyanatha Mualiar was in the field of warfare. Thondaimandala Mudaliar was the Thalavair (Commander-in-chief and Prime Minister) of four consecutive Nayak kings. An area at Sholavandan called Mudaliar fort was constructed by him, and 300 families of Thondaimandalam were settled there. He was responsible for the construction of the “Thousand Pillared Hall” at the Madurai Meenakshiamman Temple.

In the nineteenth century, Vellagal Subramania Mudaliar was gifted with the ability to compose poetry in English and Tamil. Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost- Book I’, was translated by him, using *Viruthappametre*. When the Justice Party was formed in 1917 a number of Mudaliars

joined it. When the party took power in Madras, P.T. Rajan from Mudaliar ranks became a Minister. He also held the post of Chief Minister of the Madras Presidency for some time. S. Muthaiah Mudaliar was responsible for the first Government Order which provided reservation and employment in Government. *Viduthalai* S. Gurusamy, was next in rank to Periyar E. V.Ramaswamy in the “self Respect” Movement. He was a well- known editor of ‘Viduthalai’ newspaper and worked incessantly to remove the cobwebs of superstition in Tamil Nadu. K. Baladandayutham Mudaliar, was a prominent member of the Communist Party of India in the mid 1990s. He was editor in charge of “Janasakthi” and Theozhilarasu, papers run by the party. M.Bhaktavatsalam Mudaliar another stalwart of the community was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and a Cabinet Minister of the State for a long period. O.V. Alagesan who belonged to the Congress Party was the Deputy Railway Minister in the Jawaharlal Nehru Cabinet. Thondaimandala Mudaliar’s service in the field of education was noteworthy due to several distinguished educationists like the twin brothers of Arcot Ramaswamy Mudaliar and Lakshmasamy Mudaliar, N.D. Sundara vadivelu, T. Muthian and Shanmugam, T.K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar endeavoured to popularize Tamil literature. He was a torch – bearer of Tamil cultural renaissance. In the twentieth century Thondaimandala Mudaliars are included in the list of forward communities.

### **Kammas**

The Kammas and Velamas were the two major sections of the Naidu community. The Kammas were originally warriors by occupation. They were mainly agriculturists. The leading aristocrats of the Madras Presidency and landed Zamindars hailed from Velama group of Naidu caste. The Baliji Naidus, the chief Telugu trading castes were found scattered throughout the Madras Presidency. In the Tamil districts, they were known as Vadugans and Kavarais.

### **Reddis**

The Reddis, otherwise known as Kapus were the largest Telugu speaking single caste in the Madras Presidency. The Chettiers or Chettis were next to the Vellala caste involved in trade and commercial activities. There were numerous sub-divisions among them of them, the most significant and influential group were Nattukottai Chettis, Beri Chettis, Komattai Chettis and Vaniya Chettis. The Nattukottai Chettis were the most enterprising commercial community.

They were mostly traders and moneylenders. They are known for pious and charitable activities. They contributed a considerable share in endowments of various temples. The Beri Chettis had origin later than the Nattukottai Chettis. They also claim themselves to be Vaisyas in Kumbakonam region. They are both vegetarians and non- vegetarians among the Beri

Chettis and Komatti Chettis, known as mercantile class, settled mostly in Salem, Coimbatore and Madurai. The Vaniya Chettis, the popular trader in oil, used to carry on business in oil seeds. They pressed the oil seeds and produced oil of a variety. They made a remarkable contribution to commercial prosperity besides the agricultural occupation. They were well known for their fragility.

### **Kammalas and Visvakarmas**

The artisan castes were a homogenous group constituting not less than onetenth of the total population. They were called as Kammalas and Visvakarmas, supposed to be descended from Visvakarma, the architect among gods. They believed that they are even superior to Brahmins. They also call themselves Asarees and Pattarsand they claim knowledge of the Vedas. The Kammalas are well organized and they practiced vegetarian food. The five divisions among them are Goldsmith (Tattan), Bras Smith (Kannan), Carpenter (Tachchan), Stonemason (kaltachchan) and Blacksmith (Kollan or Karuman). They are called Panchalas. The goldsmiths are not having the practice of intermarriage with the *Kollam* or *Karuman* (Ironsmiths) whereas the rest of others do so. They shaped the woods as plough, house roofs, windows and doors. Plough is needed for agriculture. They wear the holy thread and call themselves as Vishwa Brahmins. They maintain a higher place in the society their services are highly indispensable and useful to the society. The Telugu language is the mother tongue for the 35%+ of the population of Tamil Nadu. There are more than 20 m Telugu castes living in almost all the Districts of Tamil Nadu. Among them Kammahave more population (40 lakhs) whose concentration is in three regions of Tamil Nadu. (The Northern region, west and Southern regions). These people are not able to read and write except the people of border area of Andhra, but they have been following traditional customs and cultural activities.

The Kammashad their migration from the earliest period but more people have migrated during the Vijayanagar rule. Today the Kammapeople are known as Kammavar Naidu in some areas and Nayakkars in some other regions of Tamil Nadu, since they were the warriors of Naick Chiefs in those days. 'Vadugu' in Tamil means Telugu language. All the Telugu speaking people in Tamilnadu are 'Vadugar' including Kammas. Kamma's social, economic and cultural life differs from zone to zone due to the ecological conditions.

### **Conclusion**

Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Dharmapuri Districts belong to the west zone where Kamma people are living in villages engaging in agriculture. The Kamma people of Coimbatore District were the pioneers in introducing modern inputs in agriculture. They have fitted diesel and electric pump sets in their wells at first in Tamil Nadu. Agro based industries

were started by Kammasin this region. Further they have cultivated commercial crops like cotton, sugarcane and tobacco and other horticulture plants. This helped to start ginning mills, spinning mills and textile mills in the area. Most of the people are in agriculture successfully and interested in agro based small scale industries. Pallars, Parians, Chakkiliyars, Kuluvas and Valluvasearned their daily wages in grain and gifts on special occasions. Their work was also most arduous for men and they performed the whole work of cultivation.

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