

CHAPTER IV

CASTE SYSTEM IN ANCIENT SOUTH INDIA

In this chapter an attempt is made to discuss the Caste System in ancient South India chronologically. But due to scanty evidences about caste system dynasty wise in ancient Andhra and Karnataka, caste system in these states is discussed in a general manner.

The earliest indication of Tamil society is gleaned from the Sangam classics. It is still a subject of controversy as to when these classics were composed. According to the views advanced by scholars, the dates range from about 500 BCE to 600 CE.¹

In the absence of exact chronology in the Sangam works, indirect references are to be relied upon. Mention of commercial relationship with the West, particularly with Greece and Rome is made in certain Sangam classics.² The trade of the Tamils with the Yavanas, which name was first applied to the Greeks then to the Romans and in due course to all foreigners, is reflected not only in some of the Sangam classics, but is corroborated by the description provided by the Greek and Roman writers and geographers of the first and second centuries CE.

“Strabo” mentions that he saw about 120 ships sailing from Hormuz to India in 25 BCE.³ He also speaks of two Padyan embassies to the emperor

Augustus. The anonymous author of the "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea", as well as "Pliny", both assignable to the 1st century CE, as also "Ptolemy" of the succeeding century, describe the ports of South India and the commercial relationship that they had with the Western countries.⁴ This coincidence of the accounts of the foreign writers of the first and second centuries CE with the references in the Sangam classics indicate that these literary works belong more or less to this epoch. Moreover, the hoards of Roman coins unearthed in South India indicate the period when Roman commerce reached its zenith. By far the largest numbers of these coins belong to Augustus and Tiberius.⁵ It is remarkable that there is a scarcity of Roman coins subsequent to the reign of Tiberius (13-37 CE.). After the 2nd century CE the Romans traded more with the north-western region of India than with the Tamil country.

Possibly the most decisive piece of evidence regarding the date of the Roman trade and thereby supporting the references in the Tamil classics to the commercial relationship is provided by the recently discovered finds at Arikamedu. The excavations have revealed that Arikamedu was not only an ancient town and port, evidently identifiable with the 'Poduke' of "Ptolemy", but also a centre of trade with Greco-Roman world. The unique value of the discoveries lies in the fact that they enable us to date the culture of the region almost precisely. On the basis of internal and external evidence, Dr. Mortimer Wheeler concludes that the pottery and the Arretine ware and amphorae

imported from Italy can be dated to 20-50 A.D. "From a convergence of evidence it is here inferred," he says, "that the sites were first occupied at the end of the first century BCE or beginning of the first century CE with an inclination towards the later date."⁶ Sometime in the second century CE the warehouse in Arikamedu appears to have been deserted, the glorious epoch of Arikamedu's industrial and commercial activity ranged about the first two centuries of the Christian era. Thus the testimony provided by Arikamedu confirms the evidence furnished by the European writers on the one hand and by that of the Sangam classics on the other. From these it follows that the Sangam age flourished in the second century C.E. Therefore, it is not improbable that the Sangam (probably what is known as the third Sangam) existed between the first and third centuries CE. This is the basic substratum of the chronology of the early Tamils.

Regarding the social history of the Tamils from the post-sangam upto medieval periods the sources of information are inscriptions, literature and notices by foreigners. Stone inscriptions provide valuable informations though they are of greater help for political history. Incidental references are however found throwing light on the social and economic conditions of the people. But a tendency to over assess the credibility of the epigraphic data in comparison with the literary evidence is often noticed, which is not justifiable. The literary and religious treatises like the *Devaram* hymns, the *Nalayiraprabandham*, the *Jivakachintamani* and *Periyapuranam* are of considerable value, to be used

with care and discrimination. Foreign evidence, except for stray references by “Hiuen Tsang”, and the later Muslim and European visitors, is not of great value. With the aid of the available sources the social history of the Tamils can be reconstructed. Here the development of the prominent factors, like the caste system can be considered.

Caste System during Sangam Age

It is generally believed that the institution of caste, the typical Hindu social organisation, was a creation of, the Aryans and that it was introduced by them into the Tamil country also. The Aryan influence had penetrated into Tamilagam as early as the Sangam age itself, for we find references to the four fold caste system in the Sangam literature. For instance, the poet king Aryappadaikadanda Nedunchelivan clearly speaks of the four-fold division based on birth.⁷

A more ample, though enigmatic, description of the caste system of the Tamils is found in the “Tolkappiyam”. Tolkappiyar speaks of the four castes of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, though he employs appellations in terms of the Tamil language prevalent in the Tamil country. Thus he equates Brahmins with Antanar, Kshatriyas with Arasar, the Vaishyas without any modification and the Sudras with Vellalas. The implied identification of the Sudras with the Vellalas is inexplicable because, then, as ever afterwards, the Vellalas constituted only one section of the so-called Sudras.

In fact, there were several other groups included under the Aryan subdivision of the Sudras.

Besides, there are certain other deviations on the part of Tolkappiyar from the theoretical prescriptions of the Aryans. For instance, though warfare is the traditional avocation of the Kshatriyas, Tolkppiyar lays down different prescriptions at various places of his work. In one place he states that the weapons of war can be handled by Kshatriyas as well as Vaisyas,⁸ in another context he says that Vellalas too, if ordered by kings, were entitled to use weapons of war.⁹ In fact, the position of the Kshatriyas is not clearly stated by Tolkappiyar. It must be remembered that he permitted the Kshatriyas marrying women of the Velir or higher Vellala caste. Again, Tolkappiyar holds that Brahmins, too, could become kings at times.¹⁰

Moreover, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were considered by Tolkppiyar as dvijas and as such were entitled to wear the sacred thread, on the other hand, no reference to any people of non-Brahmin caste wearing it is found in any of the Sangam works. Besides, several Brahmins took to secular occupations. The most prominent instance is that of Nakkirar, the Velapparpan who earned his livelihood by carving conch-shells into bracelets.¹¹

Thus we find that though the idea of hereditary caste based on birth had appeared even in the Sangam age, it was not exactly identical with the

system in vogue in north India. One reason for this variation was that the incoming Aryans did not have at first the political power of enforcing their system throughout the country including Tamilnadu. It was a case of peaceful introduction of their social classification on the basis of self assumed spiritual authority.

A far more important reason for the slow and rather haphazard introduction of the Aryan institution of caste is to be found in the strength of the indigenous pattern of social organisation prevalent in the Tamil country before the advent of Aryans. Here, in early times social organisation arose on the basis of occupation and not on that of birth. It has been rightly said that 'the spirit of Dravidian culture was castelessness'.¹² From the Sangam classics it appears that the Tamil society existed on the physiographic basis of the regions: kurinchi, the hill country, mullai, the pastoral region, neydal, the coastal tract, marudam, the land of agricultural plains and palai, the sandy region or desert. It is important to remember that the migration of persons from one region to another was not impossible. In fact, the Kurava from the kurinchi territory could settle in the mullai region and become an idaiya or cowherd, if he moved on to the marudam and took to farming he would become a vellalam. Where specialised skill was needed there must have been a tendency for people to stick to their occupation and the region originally occupied by them. This must have been largely the case in respect of the fishermen of the neydal region. But in the generality of cases people

could migrate to other regions and take to new occupations. To thrust the chaturvarna system into the Tamil structure, which was organised on an occupational and physiographic basis was not an easy affair. Naturally the resulting fusion was of a loose and flexible character, with several anomalies.

In the Sangam age, after the coalescence of the Aryan pattern with the indigenous system in a rough and ready manner, most of the people in the *kurinchi*, *mullai*, *marudam* and *neydal* must have been grouped miscellaneously as Vellalar according to Tolkippiyar.¹³ Brahmins must have lived mostly in the *marudam* and in a few towns. The practice of Brahmins residing in separate quarters had arisen as early as the Sangam age. The quarters where the Brahmins lived were known as *parpancheheri*. In certain villages, there were streets where Brahmins alone resided. The *Kuruntogai* speaks of the Brahmin Street as *asil teruv*.¹⁴ Amur was a predominantly Brahmin village in Oymanadu.¹⁵ Again, the *Perumpanarrupadai* speaks of a village on the way to Kanchi as *Maral Kappalar Uraipati*.¹⁶

Territorially differentiated units of culture and society are deeply imbedded in the earliest Dravidian culture of the classical period. According to one of the Classical works of this early period of Tamil literature, possibly the third century CE., social groups in Tamil country were divided into five situational types on the basis of natural sub-region and related occupational

patterns. The Pattupatru enumerates these territorial segments (or tinai) as follows:¹⁷

1. *Maruta makkal* or tribes of ploughmen (*ulavar*) inhabiting fertile, well-watered tracts (*panai*) and living in villages called *ur*,
2. *Kuravar makkal* (or hill people who are foresters, make charms, and tell fortunes and may come out of the forest to work in the *panai*,
3. *Mullai makkal* (or pastoralists, also called *ayar* (cowmen), *kovalar* (shepherds), and *idaiyar* (cowherd or shepherd),
4. *Neytal makkal* (or fishing people living in large coastal villages called *pattinam* or small ones called *pakkam*, and
5. *Palai makkal* or people of the dry plains called *eyinar*. *maravar*, and *velar* who are hunters of both the dry plains and the forest.

This five-fold division of ancient Tamil speakers is interesting for a variety of reasons. As a richly elaborated poetic scheme, it provides a pool of images which gives these poems much of their expressive power. Beyond that, as a description of spatial categories of Tamil subcultures they are important cultural concepts. Finally, these categories suggest a ranking postulate comparable to the Varna concept elsewhere in the Indian cultural sphere. It is clear from Classical literature that the people of the first category, those of the *panai* who lived by the plough enjoyed a special place in the affection of the greatest Classical poets who were, for the most part, men of

the 'thriving soil' of the panai.¹⁸ It is easy, of course, to make too much of this element of 'ancient' Tamil culture. For one reason, the chronology of the literature containing these cultural categories is still controversial, with one group of scholars favouring the period from the sixth to ninth century and another larger group favouring the earlier period.¹⁹ Also, the relationships between the culture of a people, as reflected in a body of poetry collected and selected as anthologies centuries after being composed, and actual social patterns may be easily distorted.

Using the attributional and interactional markers discussed above, it is possible to delimit the macro region of 'South India' as understood here from other parts of the Southern peninsula. Specifically, this study will not deal with what is now most of the state of Maharashtra, nor with Orissa.

It is significant that there were no separate *cheris* or suburbs exclusively set apart for the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or Vellalar. The difference was due to the circumstance that many Brahmins had come from outside and were settled in separate villages or streets. But it is wrong to think that all Brahmins had come from outside. The appellations Vadama brihatcharanam and ashtasahasram indicate that while many had come from the north, others were probably raised to the position of Brahminhood from among the indigenous people.²⁰

The idea of superiority on the basis of caste had appeared even in the Sangam age, "Tolkappiyar" speaks of the Uyarn dor-the superior class and, the *pinnor*-the lower or the backward class. It may be added that the *Vellalar*, who were generally *pinnor* (lower) in relation to other communities, were themselves subdivided into superior and inferior sections. The superiors were the landowners, and it is important to remember in this connection that the superior Vellalas enjoyed *jus connubium* with the *Arasar*, and some of these Vellalas were actually chieftains ruling in certain parts of Tamilagam.

Untouchability during Sangam Age

The question is frequently asked whether untouchability had appeared among the Tamils of the Sangam age. It is difficult to give a definite answer to this question. There are no doubt references in some of the Sangam classics to the low birth of persons of certain groups. The appellations of *ilipirappalan* and *ilichinan*, applied to people of low born castes are expressive of contempt for persons of low birth.²¹ Another poem in the Purananuru speaks of the kadai siyar referring to women of the lowest class.²² From the context it appears that this reference is to women of the agricultural labouring class. But while all these references indicate a rather contemptuous position of certain low classes of people, positive evidence regarding the practice of untouchability in the Sangam age is lacking. It seems that though the germs

of untouchability were there in the Sangam age itself, the full fledged untouchability came to take shape in the Pallava and Chola epochs.

The *Devurams* which are mostly assignable to the epoch of the great Pallavas reveal that untouchability had clearly developed. It appeared primarily in relation to entry into temples and by the time of the Imperial Cholas it became elaborately systematised. The extent upto which the different categories of persons could enter the various parts of the temple was systematically worked out by the 11th and 12th centuries CE. This was the period when the rituals and ceremonies of the temples increased in number and prominence. The temples themselves became more numerous during this epoch. The rules and regulations in respect of the temples had their reflection in the day-to-day social life of the people. In fact, the multiplication of sub-castes in the age of the Imperial Cholas was not a little due to the privileges enjoyed by people of various castes in temples.

One basis for the development of untouchability in the post Sangam age was the habit of eating animal food. Whether all classes of people used meat and fish as part of their diet in the Sangam age? From certain references in *Perumpanaruppadaï* it is clear that generally Brahmins were scrupulous vegetarians. The description appearing in the *Perumpanaruppadaï*²³ of a Brahmin house shows that animals except cows were not to desecrate the vicinity of Brahmin houses. Dogs and hens were not allowed to enter the

houses of Brahmins. These facts indicate that animal food was eschewed by them. The *Perumpanaruppadai* describes in another instance²⁴ the items of the dietary, presumably common among the Brahmins of those times. In addition to rice, which was the principal item, there was a preparation made out of pomegranate fruit mixed with, chilly powder and a pickle prepared out of mangoes. There is no mention of meat or fish, and the omission does not seem to have been accidental. Again in *Kuruntioga*²⁵ there is description of *Kudalur Kilar* apparently a Brahmin lady serving food to her, husband. The details found in the description of the food show that the society was purely Vegetarian.

But those who hold that in the Sangam age the Brahmins had not taken to an exclusive vegetarian diet point out that Brahmins of the Vedic and the immediately succeeding periods were accustomed to eating meat and that the same custom was continued in the South during the Sangam age. More important is the oft-repeated description of Kapilar, who proclaims himself a Brahmin, of the excellence of meat and drink with a personal relish.²⁶

The real position seems to be, that in the beginning, all the Tamils, irrespective of caste, were non-vegetarians, and that as a result of the increasing influence of the Jain and Buddhist creeds in the land there appeared an opposition to the use of animal food.²⁷ Though it is difficult to determine the date of the change, it is clear that it must have appeared but

gradually. Therefore, it is possible that during the Sangam age, some including Brahmins, continued the old habit, while others changed over to a complete vegetarian diet.

Caste System during the age of the Pallavas

During the period of Kalabhra invasions, roughly ranging from the 4th to 6th centuries CE there was confusion in the Tamil country and the social organisation too, was upset. The Kalabhras were either Buddhists or Jains who were all opposed to the Hindu faith and the *varnasrama dharma*. With the overthrow of the Kalabhras by the end of the 6th century C.E there was a reaction in favour of Hinduism, particularly Brahminism, and it continued throughout the age of the powerful Pallavas. Whether the Pallavas were Brahmins or Kshatriyas has been a disputed question. It is likely that they were Kshatriyas, as may be inferred from Kakutsthavarman's Taalgunda inscription. But they assumed the Bharadvaja-gotra, probably that of their preceptors, and in any case the Pallavas were ardent supporters of Brahminism.²⁸

During the Pallavas there seems to have been a vast influx of Brahmins from north India. Groups of Brahmins were welcomed and settled in different villages and were helped by generous grants of land and gifts. Inscriptions show how several *ghatikas* or sacred schools of learning under the patronage of Brahmins were established in the Pallava and Pandya territories. This was

also the time when numerous temples of stone were erected. And it need hardly be repeated that the temples were the citadels of the orthodox caste system and the supremacy of the Brahmin hierarchy. In the religious and social spheres the supremacy of the Brahmins was established. The kings patronised the Brahmins and supported them in their move for exalting Brahmins. Around the temples there appeared settlements of *agraharas* containing the residences for scholars devoted to the study and teaching of the Vedas.²⁹

The rules prescribing the privileges of the various castes with reference particularly to the temples were formulated. It is well known that Mahendravarman II professed himself to be the champion of the *varnashrama-dharma*. Further, according to the Kasakudi plates, the Pallava rulers, in general, are said to have enforced the special rules of all castes and orders. With the systematisation of the four castes, their duties and rights, the tendency for the growth of sub-castes appeared. In particular, numerous small groups appeared among the Sudras, Intermarriages among them were not allowed.³⁰

The age of the Great Pallavas marked the heyday of the Bhakti Movement in Taniilnadu. This encouraged devotion to temples and rituals. No doubt, the hymnists of the Bhakti movement were drawn from various castes, but a large number of them belonged to the higher castes. The patronising

attitude of the higher sections towards sincere devotees of the lower order like Nandanar and Tondardippodi-alvar only brings to the fore the increasing hold of casteism on the people of the age. Among the 63 Nyanmars, besides Brahmins and Arasar, there were Vanigar, Vellalas, Idaiyar, Kuyavar, Panar, Vedar, Sanar, Saliyar, Sekkár (Oil monger), Vannar (washer man) and Pulaiyar. Among the Alavars of about the same epoch, along with Brahniins, Kshatriyas, Vellalas and Majavas, there were some like Tondaradippodi, Tiruppan-alvar, not born in any of the four principal castes. It is significant that Tirumalisaiyar, though of a high caste, states in one of his hymns that he did not belong to any caste.³¹

In one sense the Bhakti movement registered a protest against caste. Sincere devotion to God irrespective of the differences of caste received the greatest emphasis.

Caste System during the age of the Imperial Cholas

During the period of the Imperial Cholas the social disparities which had appeared in the earlier epoch of the Pallavas continued in an accentuated form. Temples increased, and with them the rituals and ceremonies in temples increased. Caste regulations in respect of temples became rigorous. Untouchability and unapproachability developed. The number of sub-castes multiplied.³²

New brahmadeyas appeared, and more Brahmins from the north were invited to settle down in new villages. Ghatikas and Vedic centres of learning increased in number. They promoted the study of the Vedas and of Sanskrit. For example, Kamappullur in North Arcot District, Aniyur in Chingleput District, Rajanjachaturvedimangalam in South Arcot District, Tribhuvani, Tirumukkudal, Tiruvadaturai, Peruvelur and Tiruvorriyur were some of the centres of Vedic learning. But in none of these were Tamil language and literature taught.³³

It is true that several *mathas* arose attached to the temples. They promoted the study and recitation of tiruppadiyams and *prabandhas* which, too, were of a spiritual character. The language of these religious works was of a Manipravalam style. Nor the *mathas* were thrown open to all, they were the close preserves of the higher castes. The *madattu saita perumakkal* mentioned in Nripatungavarman's inscription dated in his 25th year, referred to the group of scholars in the *matha* and not to the people at large. This restriction continued in the days of the Imperial Cholas. The same social setup continued in the 16th-17th centuries. During this period when the Vijayanagara empire expanded into the Tamil country, several new-castes appeared on account of the inflow of Telugu and Kannadiga settlers in the Tamil country.³⁴

Caste System in Ancient Andhra

Andhra Pradesh comprising all the Telugu speaking areas is a present day creation. But the Andhras as a, tribe or cultural entity, existed, in the Brahmanaical period. In the *Aitaraya Brahmana*, they were listed as a non-Aryan tribe along with others such as Pundras, Savaras, Pulindas and Mutibas. From very early times, it appears that the Andhras have been occupying the lower courses of the Godavari and the Krishna together with the adjoining areas.

Not much, however, is known about the socio-economic life of the Andhras during the pre-literate times. Archaeological evidence shows that settled habitation and agricultural activity started in the area around the middle of 3rd millennium BCE as elsewhere in Southern Deccan. For the next fifteen hundred years or more, these early farming communities, steadily progressed, increasing in size and multiplying in numbers as fresh areas were brought, under cultivations. There is much is common between these communities and their counterparts in Karnataka. The settlements were small and consisted of huts mostly circular on plan. Livelihood was based on cultivating millets and gram and rearing cattle, sheep and goats, supplemented by fishing and hunting. Making pots, stone tools and beads were among the other important occupations of the people. The dead were buried, but the mode of burial was different for adults and infants. The former

were packed into urns and buried beneath house floors, while the latter were buried in pots dug for the purpose.³⁵

Some of the coastal settlements, principally those to the north of the Krishna river seem to have had direct links with the early farming communities of Maharashtra, Central India and Orissa. Evidence to this effect has been furnished by the excavations at Kesarapalle and Jami, in Krishna and Visakhapatnam Districts respectively. Even at Nagarjunakonda in Guntur District, there are in evidence certain burial practices parallel to those known from excavations in the Jalgaon District in Maharashtra.³⁶

It is not clearly known when the Andhras passed into the fold of Aryan culture but it must have happened long before the foundation of the Mauryan empire. Aryanisation must have brought with it Vedic ritualism and caste system into this non-Aryan tribal society. Apastambha, one of the sutrakaras is believed to have sailed from Andhra-desa. The society shed off its tribal character, was reconstructed and given a new shape - a shape cast in the Aryan mould. In the new set up, each of the four traditional classes had clearly defined roles to fulfill, in which that of a Kshatriya was to protect and rule. Surely, the essentials of an urban society - institutionalised social inequalities, division of labour, social surplus, and at least a rudimentary form of government were satisfied. Megasthenes shows that the Andhras were an important power in the 4th century BCE with thirty walled towns and numerous

villages in their possession. Each of these urban units together with certain villages must have been held by a chieftain. But the Southward expansion of the Mauryan Empire amalgamated them all and absorbed them in its political framework.³⁷

With the collapse of the Mauryan power in the Deccan, after the death of Asoka, the Shatavahanas filled the political vacuum by establishing an independent rule. The period of four centuries and a half for which the Shatavahanas ruled constitutes a bright chapter in the long history of the Andhras. In spite of many conflicts they had with the Western Kshatrapas the Shatavahanas were able to assure material prosperity and political stability to the inhabitants of vast areas in the Deccan. Periplus testified to the material well being of the people and the contemporary inscriptions, fully bear out the testimony.

But the society of the Shatavahana period was less homogeneous than before, the influx of new religious and racial elements having contributed to this effect. One of the effects of the Mauryan rule was the steady infiltration of the two faiths-Jainism and Buddhism into the Deccan. Of the two, the latter was more active and commanded a larger following. All along the coastal stretch in Andhra Pradesh, remains of ancient Buddhist establishments have come to light, the more important among them being Bhattiprolu, Amarvati, Nagarjunkonda, Jaggayyapaeta, Ghantasala, Sankaram and Salihundam. All

these were flourishing centres of Buddhism during Shatavahana period and some had their origin even earlier. Jainism was, perhaps, less active than the other, but there can be little doubt that it had also a sizable following. Robert Sewell has noticed vestiges of Jainism in several of the districts of Andhra Pradesh and possibly some of them were of pre and early Christian times. The, recent discovery of a Jaina inscription of Kharavela at Guntupalle in West Godavari District justifies this possibility.³⁸

The new religions received liberal patronage from both kings and commoners. At Amaravati for instance about 145 epigraphs have been found recording donations to the Buddhist *Sangha*. The benefactions were in the nature of donations of money, cultivable plots of land and even villages for the upkeep of the *Sangha*. Buddhism and Jainism must have exercised a deleterious effect on the firm hold the Vedic religion had on the society and so did the influx of new racial elements. Ever since 3rd century BCE, there was an inflow of foreigners into this country, either as conquerors or traders. Alexander's invasion made the Greeks 'a factor' in Indian history and the Greeks were 'soon followed on the Indian scene by the Sakas, Pahlavas and Kushnas. Historical forces brought the Sakas and Shatavahanas into a protracted struggle against one another, in which people and places changed hands many a time. This apart in the early centuries of the Christian era there was a flourishing trade between India and Rome. We learn from Ptolemy that Kantakassyla, Koddaira and Allosygne were important sea-ports in the

Maisolia region on the eastern sea board. Foreign merchants must have regularly stayed at the places mentioned. Thus for different reasons, the native and foreign societies came into close contact with one another with consequences affecting both of them. The foreigners soon lost their identity and were absorbed into the indigenous fold, but the absorption could take place only with the relaxation of some of the traditional rules governing the indigenous society.³⁹

A logical corollary of the influx of non-orthodox religious faiths and alien races was the relaxation of caste rules to facilitate the assimilation of new elements into the society. The miscegenation of different caste groups must have assumed such great proportions that Gautamiputra Satakarni was constrained to assume the role of a protector of the four-fold caste system.⁴⁰

Agriculture was the most important occupation of the people, but in an urban society, there was both need and scope for other professions to flourish. Inscriptions of the Shatavahana times speak of *halikas* (cultivators), *kularikas* (potters), *kolikas* (weavers), *kamaras* (smiths), *kasakaras* (braziers), *vasakaras* (bamboo-workers), *tilapisakas* (oil-mongers), *vadhakis* (carpenters) *sethis* (merchants), *odayantrikas*, (boatmen) etc. It appears that these professions were not the monopoly of one particular caste, although according to Vedic injunction Vaishyas were to be the tradesmen of the society. We hear from inscriptions of the instance of a Kshatriya who took up

the mercantile profession. The Shatavahanas were Brahmins by caste but became a ruling family. The professional groups in the society functioned as corporate bodies, each with its own bye-laws. The corporate bodies functioned even as banks, receiving monetary deposits and disposing of the interest accruing there from in the manner specified by the depositor. We learn from a Nāsik inscription that Ushavadatta deposited two thousand *kahapanas* (Silver coins) with a guild of silk weavers at Govardhana and the interest payable at the rate of one percent per month was to be spent as cloth money for the monks spending the vassa season in the cave.⁴¹

The society of the Shatavahana times must have been fairly affluent, for without an economic surplus, it would not have been possible to found and maintain many religious establishments or engage on a large-scale mercantile activity with far off lands. Nevertheless, economic disparities within the society are clearly reflected by the brick-built houses and thatched huts which the rich and the poor constructed to live in. There are sculptural representations from Amaravati and other sites depicting the dwelling houses of the times while actual remains of the same may be witnessed from excavated sites. From the sculptures again we learn that both men and women loved to wear ornaments. Scant dress, abundance of ornaments and elaborate headgear seem to be the fashion of the times. From the sculptural reliefs of the time one gets the impression that women moved about without any inhibitions, freely

participated in social and religious activities and associated themselves with their husbands in benefactions to religious creeds or pious individuals.⁴²

With the end of the Shatavahana rule, perhaps, passed the meridian of the glory of Buddhism in Andhra. The religion, however, continued to receive patronage from both the rulers and the commoners. Several of the Ikshvaku inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda record donations to the Buddhist *sangha*, the donors being mostly the female members of the royal family. Instances like these of the Ikshvaku period can easily be multiplied and epigraphic records show that patronage to Buddhism continued even in the post-Ikshvaku period. The Anandagotra king Damodaravarman and the Vishnukundin rulers Govindavarman and Vikramendravarman were all devotees of Lord Buddha. Nevertheless the fact remains that not many new centres of Buddhism were founded in the post-Satavāhana period. The social structure of the Shatavahana period with liberty of profession continued. A powerful revival of Brahmanism was the keynote of the society in Andhra ever since 3rd century CE. Vasishtiputra Siri Chantamula's performance of Vedic sacrifices like *Ashvamedha*, *Agnisthoma* and *Vajapeya* signalled this change in the religious outlook of the people.⁴³

In consonance with the revival of Brahmanism and the rise of Hindu religious sects, we find an unprecedented activity of temple construction. The temples were liberally provided with tax-free lands and other pecuniary

benefits. Along with the gods, the Brahmins also were the chief beneficiaries as a result of the changed spirit of the times. Many of the copper-plate inscriptions of the post-Satavhana and of the eastern Chalukyan times were records of gifts of lands and villages to the learned members of the community (Brahmins) so that they might devote themselves to the performance of the Six traditional karmas-*yajna*, *yajana*, *adhyayana*, *adhyapana*, *dana* and *pratigrahana* enjoined upon them. These agraharas or lands and villages given over Vedic Brahmins must have enjoyed a great measure of autonomy in their governance. They were a more or less self-governing corporation of learned Brahmins devoted to their traditional vocation. Other vocational groups in the society must have also organised themselves as self-governing corporations, though expressive epigraphic references to their activities are not found till 1000 CE or later. It is important to note that each of these corporations functioned as a socio-economic unit, membership of the corporation being determined not only by the sameness of occupation, but to a large extent by the accident of birth as well. In course of time, these vocational groups crystallized as so many sub-castes or jatis, which were a constituent element of the society in medieval Andhra.⁴⁴

In Andhra, as elsewhere in South India, the society was dominated by the temple and the so-called caste guilds. A medieval temple was not merely a religious entity, but a powerful centre of social and economic activity. It was a landlord par excellence, a large scale consumer, creator of employment for

many, patron of education and liberal arts and occasionally even functioned as a military garrison. Numerous inscriptions of the medieval period record gifts to temples by both kings and commoners. The gifts consisted of lands, tanks, duties leviable on sales and purchases, milch cattle, oxen, sheep, goats, and trusts for the perpetual maintenance of lamps etc. As the riches increased, the ritual became elaborate, the temple grew in size and the management became more complex. An idea can be had of the numbers of functionaries by reference to certain donations to the Nagesvarasvami temple, Chebrolu, which were placed under the custody of the *sthanapati*, three hundred ayyalu, and three hundred sanis. Besides the administrative (*sthanapati*, *bhandari* etc.) and the ritualistic (*archakas*, *paricharakas*) functionaries, the major temple establishments consisted of a host of musicians, dancers, potters, washermen, braziers, carpenters and goldsmiths.⁴⁵

The basic division of the society as usual was into the four traditional castes. But, the different professional groups already functioning as self-governing units led to further diversification of the society in the form of sub-castes or jatis. For instance the Brahmins were divided into two major sects- *vaidikas* and *niyogis*, the former devoted to Vedic learning, while the latter distinguished themselves in state service as ministers, *durgadhipatis*, (in charge of forts) *dandanayakas*, (Commander) *rayasams* (writers) etc. Although there are references to terms like *niyogika-vallabha* in the Eastern Chalukya

inscriptions of 8th century C.E., the term *niyogi* does not appear to have attained a sectarian significance before the 13th century. We have inscriptional references to show that the *Vaidika* Brahmins of the medieval period organised themselves as self-governing units called *mahajanalu*, each with its own administrative assembly. Understandably, the *agrahara* villages functioned as corporate entities and provided from among themselves the necessary administrative machinery in the form of assemblies. But inscriptions also attest to the functioning of *Caidi* Brahmins as distinctive sectarian units in villages other than *agraharas*. Although inscriptional evidence is by no means clear, to a certain extent the same is true of *karanalu*, a synonym of *niyogi* Brahmins.⁴⁶

Apart from Brahmins, other vocational groups as well of the medieval times formed themselves into self-governing corporate units well-known among these are the *panchanamvaru* corporation of artisans, *virabhalanjas* confederation of trading units *teliki-veraru* corporation of oil-mongers with headquarters at Bezawada and *nakaramu* corporation of Vaisya trading community with headquarters at Penugonda in the West Godavari District. These corporate units were similar to the ancient guilds, but vastly more complex in organisational set up and had powers of social and economic regulation over their members. They strove to preserve their integrity and social identification by enunciating a *samaya dharma* - code of conduct which the members were zealously enjoined to follow. The *samaya dharma*

prescribes a particular deity for worship and firm attachment to a particular *sthala* (place) which the community believed was their original home. The learned commentator Vijnanesvara rules that the injunctions of the corporate bodies have as much legal sanction as the laws of a ruler provided they do not come into clash with the established traditions of the land.⁴⁷

Some of these communities, especially the *Virabhalanjas*, *Vaishyas* and the *teliki* grew so rich that the kings had to respect and acknowledge their wealth and social importance. They demanded and obtained from kings certain social honours like privileges to use five musical instruments, possess a banner, even wear a crown studded with diamonds and ride on a golden palanquin. If a chief of the *veerabhalanja* community or *nagaramu* went on tour, he enjoyed the privilege of being received by local authorities and presented with betel leaves, food, dress etc. While the rulers courted the mercantile and artisan communities for their support, the latter in turn served the rulers for their own well being. From the *prasasti* (grant or record) of the *telikis*, we learn that they were the mainstay of the Chalukyan kingdom (*Chalukyamulastambhayamanulu*).⁴⁸

As shown above, profession was a basis for social subdivision even in medieval Andhra. And yet another basis was of territorial origin. Each of the four traditional castes subdivided itself into compact groups formed after the geo-political units of the Andhra country. The sub-sects among the Brahmins -

the *Veginadus*, *Velandus*, *Kammanadus*, *Pakanadus*, *Mulikinidus*, *Telaganyas* etc., are a precise example for social exclusiveness based on territorial considerations. Terms like *Kammakulaja* (Brahmin of Kammanadu), *Kamma-komati* (Vaisya of Kammanadu), *Pantakapu* (sudra of Pantarashtra) are a frequent occurrence in inscriptions and literature.⁴⁹

With the society divided into a number of self-functioning units, the state had only very little responsibility in the form of social regulation. In the political atmosphere of the medieval times surcharged with strife and uncertainty, self-regulating social units were perhaps the best stratagem that the Andhras could devise for the smooth functioning, of the social system.

Villages differed in terms of ownership of the village land. Villages where the land was collectively held by all were known as *samudayikagramas* and those with private holdings were called *varapattugramas*. Villages given over tax free to officers in reward for state service were known as *umbalikas* and if such were granted to Brahmins devoted to Vedic studies, they became *agraharas*. The villages had each of them consisted of a number of servants (*ayagars* or *gramabhatas*) to look after the needs and protection of the villagers. The remuneration for the *ayagars* was in the form of land grants called *bhatavrittimanyams*. The *purohita* advised the villagers on auspicious moments, significance of omens and such other matters. There were also

washermen, barbers, goldsmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, potters to attend to the needs of the village community.⁵⁰

The above survey purports to present the growing complexity of the social institutions in Andhra during, the period under survey into a socially undivided community that the Andhras had been in pre Aryan times, hierarchical grouping based' on occupational differences was ushered in by the Aryans as an attendant measure of urbanism. But the influence of new-religious and ethnic elements in pre and early Christian times tended to weaken the Vedic fold but only for a time, till the Vedic religion revived and worked up its way to regain the position of preeminence. Soon, however, the stage was set for another social split based on occupational specialisation within each caste group. These new social sub-divisions did not show up fully in crystallised form till after 12th century A.D. The changes visualised were all processual and subtle and happened on a plane outside the sphere of state action.

Caste System in Ancient Karnataka

The Caste or Chaturvarna system developed in northern India has little evidence in Karnataka or South India in its earlier times. It was only under the Shatavahanas that it came to evidence by the importance they attached to it. "R.S Sharma" holds that "..... the shatavahanas were one of the earliest

Deccan dynasties to be Brahmanaised (aryanised). As new converts they came forward as the zealous champions of the *varna* system”⁵¹

Literary sources and inscriptions, while explaining the social act up in ancient Karnataka speak of 18 traditional castes (*hadinentu jati* or *samaya* or *ashtadasha prakriti*). The earliest reference to this is an epigraph from Lakshrneshwar (Dharwad district) of the Badami Chalukyas (8th century C.E.) Vachanakaras of the 12th century like Soddala Bacharasa, Madara Chennayya and Jedara Dasimayya also speak of these 18 castes. Mostly the four varnas spoken of in Vedic tradition and some other 14 castes are mentioned while identifying these castes in some of the literary works. But at a later date (in a 17th century work) the Lingayats are also mentioned as one of these castes.⁵²

Though the division of society on the basis of *varnas* was introduced in Karnataka after Aryanisation which started from about 600 BCE caste differences do not appear to be the legacy of Aryanisation alone. Some class or group of even among the least aryanised, considering itself as superior or inferior to some other shows that social differences existed even earlier to aryanisation. Many of the castes in Karnataka are tribal in origin and they have nothing to do with the classification introduced by *varna* system.⁵³

Among the 18 castes, Brahmanaas are mentioned superior in the hierarchy and they were found engaged in priestly and academic pursuits.

Most of them lived in the *agraharas* or settlements provided for them by a rich donor like a king. They were expected to engage themselves in *shatkarmas* or six-fold duties, viz., *yajnya* (performing sacrifice as a priest), *yajana* (sponsoring sacrifice), *adhyayana* (engaging in academic pursuits) *adhyapana* (teaching), *daana* (donating) and *prateegraha* (accepting donation).⁵⁴ But there were Brahmanaas who took to the career of warriors, as its the case at Mayurasharma the founder of the Kadamba dynasty.⁵⁵ They are referred as '*Bhuvanakkaaradhyaviprottamakulatilakam*' in inscriptions.⁵⁶

A definite exclusive caste of Kshatriyas in does not appear to have existed ancient Karnataka. Any successful soldier who could have crowned himself was dubbed as Kshatriya, as discussed about Mayurasharma above, Chalukyas appear to be originally an agricultural people as indicated by their family name Chalukya described as being derived from *salike* (an agricultural implement), and the Rashtrakutas having a plough engraved prominently on many of their records indicate their origin as tillers. The Hoysalas were 'Malepas' (hill chieftains) from the ghat region and the founders of Vijayanagar are described as Kurubas.⁵⁷

The next caste, Vaishyas, was also a loose group when all people following the profession of traders is taken into account in ancient Karnataka. Though there was a small group belonging to the Vaishya caste, there also existed castes calling themselves as *Banajigas*, *Balijas* or *Balanjus*.

Inscriptions speak also of the *Veera Balanju* their guilds, especially Aihole-500 (Avyavole-Ainurvar) and they being followers of gudda shastra, the meaning of which is not clear. All *Banajigas* were not the followers of the Vedic religion and there Jainas and *Veerashaiva Banajigas* too. But considerable section Brahamanas too were engaged in trade, and trade in vegetables, flowers, etc., was hardly in the hands of traditional Vaishyas. Sixteen *settis* of eight *nads* such as *gaveras*, *gatrigas*, *settis*, *settiguttas*, *ankakaras*, *biras*, *biravanijas*, *gandigas*, *gavundas* and *gavundaswamis* are also mentioned in inscriptions.⁵⁸

But a later literary works speak of the *Vokkaligas* as a separate caste. Among the other castes mentioned in the traditional list are the *panchallas* (the smiths, sculptors and carpenters), the *Agasa* (washerman), the *Navida* (barber), the *Jeda* or *Deva* (weaver), the *Chippiga* (tailor), the *Telliga* (oil monger), the *Kumbhar* (potter), the *Mochchiga* (shoe-maker), the *Meda* (Basket-maker), the *Golla* (cowherd), the *Tambuliga* (betel-leave seller), the *Domba* (acrobat), the *Uppara* (mason) and the *Holeya*. This list of 18 castes is known from certain literary sources, but some other sources give a few other new castes to the exclusion of a few mentioned here. This was only a traditional concept and castes were definitely not only 18 in number. The present belief of superiority of some caste over the other is very much inherited from ancient times. Untouchability too prevailed, and inscriptions speak of the residences of the *Holeyas* being outside the village or town.⁵⁹

The kings considered it their duty to protect the caste rules. They helped to enforce them. They called themselves as “Protectors of Varnashrama Dharma”. It was this responsibility which forced Kalachuri king Bijjala to punish by death sentence the parents of a couple who were married transgressing the ban on inter-caste marriage during the 12th century.⁶⁰

Caste in other region

Caste system has occurred after the migration of the Aryans, mobility defiance have been reported in historical researches. Sharma, opines concepts, frame work and paradigmics are being challenged and resisted. The historicity of the caste system, according to him, brings to light innumerable adaptations and contradictions faced by it. Dutta in his book, “Origin and growth of caste system in India” tried to present a history of the development of caste institutions through various influences and under various circumstances from the nebular stage to their present state. In Buddhist literature too the enumeration of the four castes was headed by the Kshatriyas. Buddhism and Jainism encouraged the virtues of honesty frugality and non-injury. But generally Brahmins opposed these emerging sects. They developed into popular reform movements though in origin both were Kshatriya movements representing the conflict between the ruling class and priests. These reforms movement took root in Maghadha and Kosala. But the focus of civilization had shifted eastwards, i.e., outside the earlier area of

Brahminic culture. Next Chandragupta Maurya usurped the throne in 321 B.C. he was also Shudra but his mentor and guide was a Brahmin called Kautilya. Megasthenes states about the account of the institution of caste in Indica. In his Indica he speaks about seven castes age was facing internal restriction as well as external opposition from heterodox sects. The three castes, dwijas were therotically more privileged than the Shudras and the out castes. But Vaishyas though technically dwijas, did not benefit from their privileged status like the first two castes. Pantanjali the great grammarion who lived about 50 B.C. according to him there were at least five recognised varieties of Shudras. First, there were shakas and the Yavanas, who resided outside Aryavarta, the home of the Aryans, secondly the Chandalas and the Doms who resided within the limits of towns and villages of Aryavarta.⁶¹

The Sungas were followed by the Kanvas who were also Brahmanas. The earlier of the law codes or Dharma Shastras, namely the Manava Dhama Shastra or the Manu Smriti, was written in the period of the Kanvas. Later Shakas followed Buddhism. Evidently, Brahmanism due its rigidity, was loosing of the support of the rich and the powerful. Increasing prosperity of the Vaishyas was another challenge to the Brahmin theorists. In Manu Smriti, the four Varnas/caste, sub-castes are precisely defined. In 30 B.C, Kanvas were swept by the Shatavahanas of the Deccan. The Shatavahanas too supported the Brahmin themselves. The Shakas, the Parthians and the author of Manava Dharma Shastra as degraded Khasatriyas or as warrior class in Hindu

society. The Vedic rituals were something new for the peninsular India and were brought south of the Vindhyas by the immigrant Brahmin's of the north. First century B.C marked the beginning of the period when the communities of the south at the caste of their personal religion. An effort was also made to extend the social status group system in order to give ascendance to Brahmins. The Bhagwad Gita says the new philosophy of caste, says that individual salvation is done, through the performance of duty alone. It also says there is no hope for Salvation of shudras and the Vaishyas. Thus the status of the shudras improved during Mauryan's. The Guptas who ruled from 300 A.D to 500 A.D could not asses the same degree of the state control on the society. The Gupta, firmly established the high status of the Brahmins. The Guptas who were originally Vaishyas who were accepted as Kshatriyas by the Brahmins and in reture they were gifted with land. In Gupta's and as in the reign of Harshavardhana, the relationship between castes and occupation was maintained, which had been formulated in social and legal code.

Similarly, kings of foreign races like Yavanas, Saka and Kushana did not belong to any caste. . Shudras in this period, were permitted to become traders, artisans and agriculturist. Ghurye says that this is the improvement in the status of the shudras. The Gupta period did not witness any improvement in the status of the out castes i.e., the Chandalas and Dom were already living outside the town limits. The Pallavas of Kanchi who ruled from fourth to ninth century A.D encouraged the growth of Aryan institutions in the south. The

Pallavas period saw the culmination of what had been a gradual process of assimilating Aryan institution greater assimilations of Aryan ideas being limited to upper strata of society. The system of caste was based on birth whereas ancient south Indians knew only classes and not castes.

The Nayars of Kerala, the Reddis of Mysore and Andhra, the Chettis and Vellalas of Tamil Nadu had offered spirited resistance for a long time to the process of social and cultural conquest. In north India, many castes were grouped under Kshatriyas and Vaishyas from early times. But in Bengal and in south India, mainly Brahmins and Shudras were found to the exclusion of intermediary castes. In the Malabar coast, the Nambudri Brahmins who claimed to be the descendants of the pure Rig Vedic Brahmins were patronized by the Pallava kings, Shankracharya's philosophy, Advaita closely resembled those of the Buddhists and it succeeded in wiping out the challenges put forward by Buddhism, such devotional culture resisted the Aryanisation of southern India.⁶² But from seventh to tenth C.A.D. the Aryans and sermons of the Nayanars and Alvars propagated the devotional cults in which the Vedic Gods were either denied or ignored. The ancient rite such as Aswamedha tended to fall into disuse after the age of the Gupta and early Chalukyan period. Even during the times of the Chalukyan dominance of the Brahmins continued among the four divisions of the society. Thus the caste system continued to set as important system of social relations. Despite several challenges put forward by heterodox sects, the caste system could

never be eliminated. Brahminism in one way or the other remained the religion of the multitudes and Purohit remained the nucleus of socio-religious activity in the society.

According to me caste system can be studied from three aspects: historical point of view, sociological point of view and cultural point of view. But I as a history scholar have observed from historical aspect. The caste system, the Varna system, the "Jati" system was eventually same in the ancient south Indian dynasties. Because the culture changes cannot be taken over night, it requires many years to change the system. The succeeding dynasties also followed the same pattern of caste system but slightly with little change or difference in it. Thus in other than Tamil regions, the caste system was followed according to the existing conditions and the existing rulers. But in all the dynasties, the dominance of the higher class is more over the week.

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