

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Indian Streams
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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LEADING DALIT COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH INDIA-THEIR ORIGIN AND STATUS –A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



J. Sadayamuthu

INTRODUCTION :

The practice of collecting data on caste in the Census was in vogue till 1931. The Census Reports of the years 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941, 1951 and 1961 listed forty major Hindu castes. In the year 1964, the Government had recognized 120 castes as eligible for special treatment. Of these, six castes, Chakkiliya, Kurava, Nayadi, Palla, Paraiya and Valluva, received special treatment. These six castes are found in all parts of the Tamil Nadu.

Paraiyas

The 'Paraiyas' of Tamil Nadu, who form a sizeable portion of the Tamil society. They were the typical representatives of the Depressed Classes in the South. It is from their caste name that the word 'Paraiya'¹ meaning an 'Outcaste' has been coined and added to the English language. 'Paraiyas'

ABSTRACT

The modern concept of Dalits –the sum total of untouchable castes. They constitute 18 percent of the total population of India, peculiarly enough, are treated as social untouchables for over a period of two thousand years. The word Dalit is a Sanskrit form of the 'broken' or 'split' from ascender. The word, 'Dalit' in Marathi means 'poor' and 'down-trodden' They are known by different names at different stages in South India. They are at the lowest rung in the social hierarchy of the South Indian Society. Until the dawn of modern era, neither the civil leadership nor the government came forward to do anything for the wellbeing of the Dalits. They were identified on the basis of untouchability and exactly enumerated. Their population in the erstwhile Madras Presidency was 15.5%. This paper is an attempt to trace their origin, and their status in the past and present in South India. In this endeavor, the leading Dalit communities in South India are focused.

Key Words: Paraiyas, Valluvas, Chakkilias, Pallas, Madigas, Malas, Holeyas, Pulayas.

SHORT PROFILE

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form a distinct caste with a number of sub-castes. They have their own rules, caste headmen and Panchayats. They guard their traditions and usages. "They are, equally with the higher castes, filled with that compound of pride of birth, exclusiveness and jealousy called caste feeling."²

Various roots are attributed to its origin of the word, Paraiya. One view is that 'Paraiya' is derived from the root word 'Parai' which means a kind of drum, The 'paraiyas' are considered traditional drum heaters. Some scholars raise objection to this derivation. 'Paraiyas' act as drum-beaters only

on occasions like festivals, marriages and funerals of high caste Hindus,' but they normally engage themselves as cobblers, weavers and as cultivators. In Kannada also the word 'Parai'

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means drum, but the Depressed Classes in Karnataka are not called 'Paraiyas'. Instead, they are called as 'Holeyas'. In Tamil Nadu, Paraiyas' are not the only drum- beaters, the barbers too act as drummers on festive occasions. In certain areas of Tamil Nadu, there is a separate caste called Melakkaran whose profession is beating a drum called, Melam. One of the Gods of the Tamils, Siva, is said to play a kind of drum called 'Utukkai' while his first devotee, 'Nanti' is an expert player of a type of drum called Mattalam. But the Lord or the Nanti is not regarded as Paraiyas. "It seems in the highest degree improbable that a large and at one time powerful community should owe its name to an occasional occupation, which one of its divisions shares with other castes".³

Only once does the word 'Paraiya' occur in Sangam literature.⁴ It is found often in the inscriptions of the Cholas of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries A.D.⁵ In ancient Tamil literature, the beaters of battle drums are called Valluvas⁶ and 'Pulaiyas'.⁷ Pulaiyas are also described as drum- beaters during funeral processions. The drum which is used on such occasions is called 'Capparai' meaning funeral drum. The word 'Paraiya' must have first been applied only to those Pulaiyas who beat drums during funeral processions.⁸

Later, the word came to be applied to all Pulaiyas. The word 'Paraiya' is derived according to some scholars from the word 'Paraiyar'⁹ which denoted a line of Chera Kings, according to 'Pathitruppattu', a Sangam Classic. The descendants of the Chera Kings, Peruncera liumporai and Kutakko Ilancerilirunporai¹⁰, who were defeated by Cholas, were called Paraiyas. Another view is that the 'Paraiyas' were the Nagas of Sri Lanka who were conquered by a Chola King and brought as captives to work in the construction of the banks of the river Kaveri.¹¹ The Tiyas, a Depressed Class of Kerala, are also regarded as a branch of the Nagas.¹² In the Tamil Ramayana, Lanka is mentioned as the town of the Paraiyas.¹³ These are mere surmises from which

no categorical conclusions can be deduced.

Another root for the word 'Paraiya' is the word, 'Para' which means rock.¹⁴ Here, the term 'Paraiyas' denotes a hill people. The contention is that originally the 'Paraiyas' inhabited the hill tracts and later on came to the plains. This is an unconvincing argument because in the ancient Sangam literature of the Tamils, the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu are described as one of the tribes inhabiting the Mullai region,¹⁵ which is situated between the hills and the plains, and they are mentioned as weavers and cultivators and not as a mountain people.

Paraiyan is also designated as the original owner or ruler of the land.¹⁶ In this context the word, 'Par' which means earth or land is taken as the root. The argument is that the 'Paraiyas' were the original owners and rulers of the Tamil region and that when they were conquered, their lands were confiscated from them and they were subjected to slavery.

The term 'Paraiyan' is derived by some from the Sanskrit word

'Para' which means foreign. Those who were foreign to their culture were denoted as 'Paraiyar' by the Brahmmins.¹⁷ The term 'Paraiyar' indicated those who spoke ill of the Brahmmins.¹⁸ It is said that those who ridiculed the Brahmmins were condemned and oppressed and segregated by the Brahmmins when they became predominant in the Tamil society.¹⁹

The term 'Paraiyar' could also have originated from the term 'Palaiyar' meaning ancient people. It is probable that the ancient people of the Tamil region, Palaiyars, came to be called 'Paraiyars' by the passage of time. Even to-day a tribe called 'Palaiyar' is to be found in the Palani Hills of Tamil Nadu.²⁰ But they are not related to the Paraiyars of the plains.

The notable difference between Palaiyars and Paraiyars is that the former abstain from beef eating while the latter relish it. The Palaiyars are not Untouchables, whereas the Paraiyars are an Untouchable Depressed Class.

Though explanations concerning the

origin of the Paraiyars are many and varied, each contains some element of truth. The term, 'Paraiyar' indicating a drum-beater may be taken as a plausible explanation. But the term 'Paraiyar' was not popular during the Sangam age. It was only during the reign of the Imperial Cholas that this term became popular. The segregation of the 'Paraiyars' was done during this period. During this time the Brahmins were pre-eminent in the society. The term, 'Paraiyar' was used derisively by the Brahmins and Brahminised Hindus to indicate those who were foreign to the Brahmanic culture. Though the original Tamil word, 'Paraiya' seems to have been derived from the word 'Parai' meaning drum, later on the term came to connote those 'outcastes' who were foreign to the Brahmanic culture.

There are many legends regarding the origin of the 'Paraiyars' and in each some element of truth is discernible. It is inferred from these legends that the 'Paraiyars' were once priests in the temples of Siva like the Brahmins and that their beef-eating habit reduced them to lower status. In the past, priests used to offer meat to Gods and Goddesses. In Tirumurukattupadaai, a Sangam classic, mention is made of sacrificing a goat to Lord Muruga and offering its flesh to Him.²¹ It is said, in Periyapuramam that Kannappar, a devotee of Siva, offered the meat of pigs to God.²² It is probable that the 'Paraiyars' were once priests and when animal sacrifice was discontinued, the Brahmins could have usurped their place.

Valluvas

Valluvas are actually a section of the Paraiyars. In the ancient Tamil society, they enjoyed the status of priests. This is attested to by literary and Inscriptural evidences. In the Census Report of 1891, H.A.. Stuart says that the Valluvas were priests to the Pallava Kings before the coming of the Brahmins and continued to be so for sometime even after their coming.²³

At present, Valluvas act as priests at the ceremonies of Paraiyars, Chakkilias and other

Depressed Classes. They are erudite scholars in Tamil literature and are noted for their skill in casting horoscopes and foretelling the future. They have great skill in surgery and act as rural doctors. Tiruvalluvar, the author of Tirukkural, is considered a Valluva by caste, The legend that Tiruvalluvar was born of a Brahmin father and a Paraiya or Puaiya mother was a concocted story. In the earlier editions of Tirukkural this story does not find place. But it is found in later editions.²⁴

The Valluvas occupied the pride of place in the ancient Tamil society. Tivakara Nikantu, a Dictionary of the Eleventh Century, mentions the Valluvas as royal priests who performed funeral obligations in the king's household.²⁵ The enviable position held by the Valluvas in the ancient Tamil Society is brought to light by the post-Sangam classic.²⁶ When the Brahmin priests replaced them, the status of the Valluvas began to deteriorate. Their efforts to regain their lost position were thwarted by the Brahmins who had the patronage of the kings. It was in anger that the Valluvas set adrift the rumour that it is an ill-omen to see a single Brahmin on one's way. This is believed by many even now. The Valluvas and their Paraiya followers began to shun the presence of Brahmins in their villages. Even now if, by chance, a Brahmin enters a Paraicheri, the Paraiya women sprinkle cowdung water on the spot touched by the feet of the Brahmin to cleanse it.²⁷

Chakkilias

The Chakkilians found in Tamil Nadu are not natives of the soil. They migrated to the Tamil region from Andhra Desa and Mysore State. This is deduced from the fact that they speak either Telugu or Kannada. It is not known as to when this migration took place. Mention of Chakkilian Kuntal (plot of the Chakkilian) is made in an inscription of the Chola period (1030 A.D.)²⁸ Madigas, the counterparts of the Chakkilias in Karnataka, claim that they are the children of

Matangi.²⁹ The Chakkilias of Tamil Nadu are not sure of their origin. The Chakkilias seem to be one of the ancient inhabitants of the Dravida Country. They are as ancient as the Paraiyas.

It is said that the Matangas, who were conquered by the Western Chalukya King Mangalesa (567-610 A.D), were the progenitors of Madigas.³⁰ According to H.A. Stuart, they belonged to a ruling dynasty called Matanga.³¹ It is known that the Chakkilias, similar to the Paraiyas, were an ancient tribe who were subjugated as Untouchables by the Brahmins and other high caste Hindus because of their beef-eating habit.

Pallas

The degree of untouchability of the Pallas is next to that of the Paraiyas. The 'Pallas' form an important segment of the village society because they form the bulk of agricultural labourers. They are good at cultivating paddy. Their womenfolk are good at planting and weeding paddy. They seem to have been good at this work even from the Sarigim Age. In support of this view there are many references to women of the last class, namely Kataiciyar.³² The Pallas are also denoted by the title Kataiyar.³³ The ancient heroic tribes called Mallas described in Sangam classics were probably the ancestors of the Pallas.

The word 'Pallam' in Tamil means a pit or low-lying region. Since paddy fields are found in low-lying areas and since the Pallas are usually engaged in the cultivation of paddy, the name 'Pallam' could have been derived from the word, 'Pallam'.³⁴ This explanation is not satisfactory. The 'Pallas' and 'Pallis' (Padaiyatchi or Vannia Kula Kshatriyas) considered themselves descendants of Pallavas who once ruled over Andhra and Tamil regions. They assume the title of Muppan (elderly person), Kutumpan and Mannti. The latter may be a corruption of the word Manradi, a title borne by Pallava (Kurumba) people. Thus the Pallas are considered the descendants of the old Pallavas.³⁵

In Tamil lexicons, the Pallavas are

classified as outcastes. It is probable that after the defeat of the Pallavas by the Imperial Cholas, the remnants of the former were reduced to slavery by the kings and their Vellala nobles. It is said that one Adandra Chola brought a large number of Vellalas from the Tulu country and made them clear the forests in Tondaimandalam and with their help suppressed the Kurumpas.

A large number of the Kurumpas were killed by the Vellalas by treachery and the surviving ones were enslaved as agricultural labourers.³⁶ In recognition of this achievement, the Chola King honoured the Vellalas by conferring on them the title, 'Mutali'. There is not much historical truth in these traditional lores. But it may be inferred that the Kurumpas, who were the remnants of the Pallavas, were enslaved by the Chola kings in the remote past. J.H. Nelson is of the opinion that the Vellalas, after having suppressed and enslaved the Kurumpas at that the end of the Ninth or the beginning of the Tenth Century A.D. colonized Tondairandalam.³⁷

The higher class Pallavas who accepted Chola sovereignty and joined the Chola army were called Pallis or Pataiyatchis.

The low class Pallavas who were reduced to slavery came to be known as Pallas. Professor Oppert is of the opinion that the Pallas and Pallis represent the ancient inhabitants of the mountains in South India. Those who continued to live in the mountains were called Mallas, Malas and Mahars, and those who came down to the plains came to be known as Pallas, Pahlavas, Pallavas, Bhillae, Bhila and Ballalas.

The Pallas call themselves Devendra Kulattar (descendants of Indra, Lord of Devas). A medieval inscription connects the Kutumpas, a branch of Pallas, with the Pandyan Kings.³⁸

All traditions connected with the origin of the Pallas bore out the fact that they were an ancient community of Tamil Nadu, and that they were owners of land and cultivators of wet land. The Pallas are a well-organised community and

they are sub-divided into a number of sub-sects. The antiquity of this community is understandable from several factors including the performance of buffalo sacrifice.³⁹ The depressed state in which this community is found now may be explained by its failure to adapt itself to the culture of the Aryans groups of Tamil society.

Madigas

The Madigas are distributed throughout Mysore region but 88 percent of this caste is found in Mysore, Bangalore, Kolar and Tumkur districts. According to the 1921 Census, they numbered 2,96, 821. H.A. Stuart, writing in the Madras Census Report of 1891 says: " Formerly a Matanga dynasty was in Canarese Country and the Madigas are believed by some to be the descendants of people who were once a ruling race."⁴⁰

The Madigas themselves have no traditions of any connection with a ruling race and the conjecture may be due to a mere similarity of names and to the belief that, being aboriginal, they might have ruled the country at some remote past. It is viewed that a Western Chalukya King Mangalesa (567-610 A.D.) conquered Mantangas, but it is surmised that they were a hill tribe and the forefathers of the Madigas.⁴¹

Madigas consider them as the children of Matangi. Matangi is a Sanskrit name for Kali and it is possible that the Madigas once played a significant part in the worship of the Goddess. The employment of Chakkiliya and Madiga women in Sakti worship adds colour to this supposition. The Matangas and the Kalachchuris are mentioned in connection with Mangalesa who was the younger brother and successor of Keertivaraman I, whose reign lasted from 567-611 A.D. Of the Matangas, nothing is known except the mention of them.⁴² Matanga means a Chandala, a man of the lowest caste, an outcaste, a kirata, mountaineer, a barbarian. The Madigas usually call themselves Matangi Makkalu or

children of Matangi or Durga, who is their Goddess. It is probable that the Matangas were an aboriginal race of little importance to have left any record of themselves. The tutelary deity of the Madigas is Mathamma or Matangi who is said to be worshipped by the Komuttis under the name of Kanyapararneswari.⁴³

Madigas speak Kannada or Telugu according to the locality they live in. The Kannada Madigas do not inter-marry with the Telugu Madigas who are leather-workers. They follow a primitive way of tanning and preparing leather.

The Madigas are the lowest caste and they live apart in quarters outside the village. They are not permitted to use the common well and they have their own barbers and washermen. A Madiga should not approach a Brahmin within a distance of about twenty paces. Any Brahmin who has been touched by a Madiga must purify himself by bathing and washing all his clothes and by changing the sacred thread. The Brahmins are not allowed to enter the living quarters of the Madigas. The Madigas are more primitive than Holeyas and they differ considerably in outward appearance from the higher castes.

Other Dalit Communities of the Region

Similar to the Paraiyas of Tamil districts, the Holeyas of Mysore and Malas of Andhra are good agricultural labourers. They are regarded as a less-civilized Class of the same race that was inhabiting the country from time immemorial. This is attested to by researchers in anthropometry and ethnology. These Untouchables segregated themselves and avoided the Brahmins. The practice of the Holeyas shunning the entry of Brahmins into their villages is cited in support of this theory.⁴² The Untouchables of the Kanarese region are called Holeyas. The Holeyas act as priests of village Goddesses.⁴³ The Malas of the Andhra region are the custodians of the Goddess Gowri, and Nandi and Ganesa.⁴⁰ The Malas are

equivalent to the Paraiyas of Tamil Districts. A major group of the Depressed Classes in the Malabar region is the Pulaya, widespread throughout the present-day Kerala.

That some of the Depressed Classes were of much use to the society is evident from the fact that the Holeyas in Mysore decided the boundary of disputes.⁴¹ The Komuttis (Merchants) and Kammalas (Blacksmiths) invited the Madigas and Vettiyanas (grave-diggers) at the time of marriages, and if the invitees were not satisfied with the reception, they had the right to cut down the plantain trunks in the marriage pandal (shed). This practice refers to the recognition of the lordship of the soil in bygone days by these Depressed Classes.⁴⁴

To conclude, these Dalit communities of the various States of the South India once enjoyed a status of privileged class especially prior to the advent of the Brahmins who replaced them in all their key position. For instance, the influence of the Brahmins in the royal court diminished the status enjoyed by the Valluvas who were also luminaries in astrology. Hence the arrival of the Brahmins and their preponderance in all spheres of public activities placed the position of the Dalits in lower position and they became a toiling and moiling class. However their services to the society are not negligible and their contribution to the elevation of the society is immense even though their own society is not improved much

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