



## RELIGION AND CASTEISM IN TAMILNADU –ANALYSIS

## History

**Dr. T. Balasubramanian**

M.A.,(His),M.A., (His & Tour Mgt), M.A., (Pol.Sci), M.Phil.,Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to execute Religion and casteism in Tamil Nadu. Social and religious life of the people, in a particular place is of primary importance to understand the history of that area. Therefore, an attempt has been made to trace the socio-religious condition of the people of Tamil Nadu in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A delightful land of natural beauty, Tamil Nadu provided settlement for different castes and religions. Indian society is old and extremely complex. India has covered a span of five thousand years since its first known civilization. Religion is the belief in spiritual things. Religion, in the true sense, consists in one's living a truthful life in practice, in one's sincere love for truth, goodness and beauty". Major religions of the world like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are found here, in addition to a bewildering variety of cults. In the process of its evolution, Indian society has acquired a composite culture characterized by stable patterns of pluralism. Hence this paper has attempted to evaluate the Religion and casteism in Tamil Nadu.

## KEYWORDS

Religion and Casteism, Tamil Nadu

## INTRODUCTION

Social and religious life of the people, in a particular place is of primary importance to understand the history of that area. Therefore, an attempt has been made to trace the socio-religious condition of the people of Tamil Nadu in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A delightful land of natural beauty, Tamil Nadu provided settlement for different castes and religions. Indian society is old and extremely complex. India has covered a span of five thousand years since its first known civilization. During this period, several waves of immigrants, representing different ethnic strains, linguistic families, have merged into its population to contribute to its diversity, richness and vitality. Major religions of the world like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are found here, in addition to a bewildering variety of cults. In the process of its evolution, Indian society has acquired a composite culture characterized by stable patterns of pluralism.

## Religion

Man is not merely an intellectual animal but essentially a social, moral and spiritual being. According to Sir.E.B.Taylor, Religion is the belief in spiritual things. Religion, in the true sense, consists in one's living a truthful life in practice, in one's sincere love for truth, goodness and beauty". Portuguese missionaries like Francis Xavier and Beschi transformed the Parava community into a new spiritual dimension. In spiritual thinking, the Paravas had been completely transformed. Temples and Mutts were the two great gifts of Mediaeval Hinduism to South India. These two institutions expanded gradually and consolidated their position in Tamil Nadu. To a large scale, religion and temple controlled and regularized the activities of the people. The revival in Hinduism caused the decline of Jainism and Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Temple served as a powerful social and economic entity and a source of religious inspiration to the people. They possessed treasuries, court houses, parks, fairs, exhibition sheds and halls of learning and assessment. The vast majority of the population was Hindu by religion. The Hindu Society followed as caste system and untouchability practices like. In 1921, approximately seven percent of the population was Muslim, mostly of the Sunni Faith. By far the largest proportion of these were low caste converts to Islam, weavers and artisans in the Telugu areas, petty merchants and traders in Tamil Nadu and peasants in Malabar, who were much nearer in language and customs to their various Hindu neighbours than they were to custodians of Islamic culture. About three percent of the inhabitants of Madras were Christians of various kinds.

The largest concentration in the region was in Tirunelveli District where about ten percent of this population followed Christianity. Most of these were 'low caste' Shanars and fishermen but a handful came from important peasant stock. The other main area of Christian activity was in the North East where again success was obtained mostly at the bottom of the social scale. Thus the Madras Presidency was a peculiar collection of autonomous territories. After Independence, the heterogeneity of the Province was rationalized by its partition into five separate states; Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Mysore and Kerala and from the remaining part of the Madras Presidency was

formed the Madras State on 1 November 1956.

## Administration of Christianity

The first three decades of 20<sup>th</sup> Century have been a period of unrest for the Catholic Christian population of Tuticorin in particular and of the fishery coast in general. In fact, the trouble had started at the end of the Dutch period itself. The crux of the problem was the spiritual authority to be exercised over the Catholics. The Catholic Church has a very neat and well defined mode of exercising its spiritual authority, with the Pope as the supreme head of the entire Church and each local bishop with well defined geographical area called "Diocese", in order to exercise this spiritual authority. But in India, it was a time when "dioceses" were not yet formed. In the process of forming such dioceses, different areas were assigned to different groups of missionaries who operated under various "missions". The fishery coast was under the Portuguese mission in Goa. The King of Portugal enjoyed certain privileges from the Pope, as the patron of this mission which was also called "Goa Mission" or "Padroado Mission".

## Religious Background

The composite State of Madras was a home of conservatism and orthodoxy where caste had taken deep root and its ramifications were numerous. B.N. Luniya, in his Evolution of Indian Culture, states that the caste system of the Hindus was about 2,000 years old. When the Aryans migrated to India from the wild Central Asian areas, they developed the caste system. In the beginning, the caste was determined by the racial factor or colour. Hence there were only two divisions' viz., Aryans and Non-Aryans. In course of time, caste was determined on the basis of occupation. It subsequently created four major castes. There were the Brahmins whose duty was to learn and guide, the Kshatriyas, the warrior, the protector and the ruler, the Vaisya, engaged in economic pursuits and the Sutra, the common man, the tiller and the cultivator. There were some non-Aryans called Chandalas or Mlechchas. They received the lowest rank in the caste ladder. They lived outside the villages and therefore, they were considered outcastes. The early Tamil Literature did not mention any caste.

Caste system in Tamil Nadu is one kind of stratification, based on inequality among human beings in matters of social interaction. The word 'caste' means breed, race or colour in Latin and it was first used by the Portuguese in India. The Sanskrit term equivalent for 'caste' in ancient Indian literature is varna. It denotes two or three meanings. The generally accepted meaning is 'colour'. In 1938, When C.Rajagopalachari was the Chief Minister in Tamil Nadu, he ordered scheduled caste people also take bath in Kuttalam.

The Indian caste has economic, social and religious aspects. In the economic field, it prohibits certain occupations and in the religious aspect, it lays down certain customs and rituals. A person's social status is defined by the caste rather than his economic means or the occupation he follows. An Indian Hindu cannot choose or change his caste and castes also multiply due to slight change in occupation, migration, adoption of practices, religious rules, rituals and

ceremonies. In December 1930, the Kallars in Ramanathapuram propounded eight prohibitions and the disregard of which led to the violence by the Kallars who furiously set fire to the huts and destroyed the properties of the depressed classes (Adi Dravidas) for disregarding the prohibitions. A resolution by the Anti-Untouchability Conference of 1919 in Madras regretted that in restaurants, hotels, hair-dressing saloons, water-pandals etc., notices were hung prominently, excluding the 'Untouchables'. The practice was in vogue till at least 1931 and these prohibited washer men were called 'Porada Vannar'.

Between 1921 and 1931, the work of amelioration improved considerably. The Madras Government appointed a Commissioner of Labour entrusted with the task of encouraging the education of the depressed classes and looking after their economic interest. In 1921, there were still six Districts in the Madras State untouched by the activities of the Commissioner of Labour. In 1923, the Government issued an order that no grants would be paid to any aided educational institution which refused admission to the children of the Depressed Classes. However, according to evidence, given in Madras, before the Lee Commission in 1924, untouchables were not permitted to enter the courts, even though they were parties to a case or witnesses, but had to stand far off and their examination was conducted by a go-between who would go out, question them and take their answers to the judge. This was more or less similar to the practice in Malabar for a long time.

Even the Brahmins were broadly divided into Vaishnavites and Saivites which were further sub-divided into sub castes. A Brahmin alone could become priest, an officer of the state but never a domestic servant. Further, they were considered holy for they automatically got the respect due to the priests. The gradation of castes in society, in the descending order of Varnas, was determined in relation to a distance scale based on the ideas of pollution. The classification was called 'Social Precedence'.

The caste system in India is the paradigmatic ethnographic example of caste. It has origins in ancient India, and was transformed by various ruling elites in medieval, early-modern, and modern India, especially the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. It is today the basis of educational and job reservations in India. The caste system consists of two different concepts, varna and jati, which may be regarded as different levels of analysis of this system. Vaidyanathan argues that the caste system existed at the village level to serve the needs of its people, however, the method in which the 1881 census was carried out in India by the British Raj institutionalized the caste system on a much larger national scale. The caste system as it exists today, is thought to be the result of developments during the collapse of the Mughal era and the rise of the British colonial regime in India. The collapse of the Mughal era saw the rise of powerful men who associated themselves with kings, priests and ascetics, affirming the regal and martial form of the caste ideal, and it also reshaped many apparently casteless social groups into differentiated caste communities. The British Raj furthered this development, making rigid caste organisation a central mechanism of administration. Between 1860 and 1920, the British segregated Indians by caste, granting administrative jobs and senior appointments only to Christians and people belonging to certain castes. Social unrest during the 1920s led to a change in this policy. From then on, the colonial administration began a policy of divisive as well as positive discrimination by reserving a certain percentage of government jobs for the lower castes. In 1948, negative discrimination on the basis of caste was banned by law and further enshrined in the Indian constitution, however the system continues to be practiced in India with devastating social effects.

Brahmin lawyers played an active role in the Indian National Congress. Anti-Brahmin feeling arose within the Congress because the congress was regarded by the Non-Brahmins as a secretarian institution of Brahmins that had no direct link with the Non-Brahmin masses. The Congress Session in Madras in 1914 was dubbed as a "Brahmin Congress" and it was remarked that it would not hesitate to masquerade under the name of Indian National Congress and make representation on behalf of all people. A fear was openly expressed that "Home Rule" would degenerate into Brahmin Rule.

In striking contrast to the privileged Brahmins were the segregated Panchamas who were called untouchables. They established parallel societies, having their own roads, wells, their own shops, hotels, barbers and washer men, deities and priests, their own burial grounds from which all Caste Hindus kept away. This elaborate system of apartheid segregated the members of the panchama society and kept

them at the greatest physical, cultural and economic distance from the Caste Hindus. Originally, they were casteless but later they formed their own castes. They did not intermarry but were collectively known as the depressed classes and later the Harijans.

### Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha

The Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha sent a petition to the Government in 1896, requiring agrarian concessions for the Pariahs. In 1898, it made a specific request for lowering, in the case of Pariahs, the standard of qualifying test prescribed for admission to subordinate medical services. In 1916, the Depressed Classes Society held a Conference and requested the Government to enquire into the exact condition of the depressed classes and to make recommendation for measures which would secure freedom and justice for the depressed classes. Due to these special privileges, there was a heavy demand by many of the castes to get included into the backward list. Applications from several castes requesting admission to the list were received by the Government and these were generally forwarded to the District Collectors. They were asked to report on the position and the status of the caste in question and on their favourable recommendation, the castes were admitted to the list of backward classes. The number of backward classes, which was 39 in 1895, rose to 128 in 1920 and reached the figure of 152 in 1950. More castes began to demand and receive the special educational concession offered by the Government. To start with, caste organizations were formed by the new intelligentsia. Adi Dravida Mahajana Sabha is a case in point. Later the South Indian liberal Federation was formed in 1916 to speak for the Non Brahmins against the Brahmin hegemony. The formation of Justice Party accelerated the process of realizing Social Justice in Tamil Nadu.

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