



Untouchability in Tamil Society During the Later Pallava Period

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KEYWORDS

During the period of the Pallavas which followed the later *Cankam* age notions of the caste system and untouchability seem to have taken deeper roots in Tamil society. The Pallava kings who traced their descent from a brahmana of the *bhadravaja gotra*, naturally patronized the brahmanas and Vedic Hinduism as propounded by them. One of the Pallava kings, Parameswara Varman (A. D. 670-700) openly espoused the cause of the *varnasrama* system of society and enacted laws to preserve the *caturvedi* system,¹ which implies the division of society into superior *savarna* castes and inferior *avarana* castes which were untouchable to the former. Moreover, it was the Pallavas who brought a number of brahmana families into Tamil Nadu from places like Magadha in the north, granted them tax-free lands and settled them in separate villages called *caturvedi mangalams*.²

The brahmanas who were settled in the *caturvedi mangalams*, were well versed in Sanskrit scriptures such as *Brahmanas*, *Dharmasutras* and *Dharmasastras*, and ruthlessly applied their injunctions to the society in which they lived. The newly settled brahmanas finding that there was no well demarcated *ksatriya* and *vaisya varnas* or castes duly initiated into Vedic *mantras* and reciting them with sacred thread over their shoulders, simply designated all the non-brahmanas as *sudras*. Those who were practicing certain menial jobs which were a taboo for brahmana priests, according to the *Dharmasastras*, were treated as *candalar* or untouchables. For example the *Ezhavas* who were toddy tappers were prohibited from toddy-tapping from the palmyra trees situated in *caturvedi mangalams* inhabited by brahmanas.³ Here we can discern the influence of the *Dharmasastras* on brahmanas, for according to *Manu Dharmasastra* and *Yajnavalkya Smrti*, the consumption of liquor is one among the five great crimes or *pancamahapatakas*⁴ According to the *Dharmasutras* even a *sudra* becomes a *patita* (outcaste) by consuming liquor.⁵ The *Ezhavas* whose sole profession was toddy-tapping were therefore not allowed into the brahmana settlements called *caturvedi mangalams*. The *Ezhavas* and *Tiyas* of Kerala, the *Canars* of Tamil Nadu, the *Idigas* of Andhra Pradesh and the *Pasir* of Madhya Pradesh seem to have become untouchables to the caste Hindus only because of the taboo against liquor prescribed in the *Dharmasastras*.

The Pallava period witnessed the heyday of the *Bhakti* Movement in Tamil Nadu, which was manifested in the form of Saivism and Vaisnavism. The leaders of the movement known as *Nayanmars* (Saivites) and *Alvars* (Vaisnavites) have left behind them thousands of thrilling devotional songs, in which we also get a glimpse of the social conditions prevailing during that period. Their catholic attitude prompted them to condemn outright the rigid caste system and untouchability which they found around them. For example *Appar* or *Tirunavukkarasar* (seventh century AD.) who is said to have converted the Pallava King Mahendravarman from Jainism to Saivism declares in one of his songs that he would worship a sincere devotee of Siva as a veritable God even if he happened to be *apulaiya* infested with leprosy and who revels in skinning the

cow and eating its flesh.⁶ From this song, we understand that *pulaiyas* were engaged in killing and skinning cows which was indeed a taboo to an orthodox Hindu especially a Saivite. Further they were guilty of eating its meat, which is a prohibited food for all Hindus, inasmuch as the cow is regarded as *gomata* (mother cow) sacred to the Hindus and the bull as the vehicle of Lord Siva. The *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* and *Satapatha Brahmana* vehemently condemn beef-eating, especially the flesh of a cow.⁷ Those who ate beef were characterized as *antyajas* (last in society or lowest born) by the *Veda-Vyasa Smrti* and other scriptures. It is clear that the aversion against beef-eating had percolated deeply into Tamil society during the Pallava period. But in Saivism even the low born untouchables were freely admitted into it during the Pallava period. *Appar* declares, that even the lowest born will be raised to the position of the highest-born if only he chanted the holy name of Siva.⁸

Cambantar (seventh century A. D.), one of the three great *Tevaram* hymnists took along with him a *pana* by name *Tiruneelakanta Yalppanar* so that he could play on his *yal* (a kind of lyre) whenever a song was sung by *Chambantar*. *Panas* seem to have been considered untouchables during this period. Therefore when he took his disciple into the house of an orthodox devotee called *Tirunilanakkar*, there was some hesitation on the part of the host to admit him into the house especially near the sacrificial mound. But *Cambantar* insisted that his disciple should be admitted. It is said that when the *pana* went near the sacrificial mound, the fire began to glow from right to left (an auspicious sign) rather than from left to right as usual.⁹ This incident reveals that God was pleased to have an untouchable near the sacrificial fire. In another episode, *Yalppanar* who was initially refused entry into the *Meenakshi Temple* at *Madurai*, was later on admitted when *Lord Lokanata*, the temple God appeared in the dream of the temple priest and ordered him to admit the *pana* devotee into the sanctum sanctorum. So also at *Tiruvurur* he was admitted into the temple by God who opened for him the northern gate, which was closed by the priests.¹⁰ These stories whether true or not reveal the fact that *pulaiyas* and *panas* were untouchables who were denied admission into the temples.¹¹

Manikkavacakar, an illustrious saint of this period, calls himself a *pulaiya* with a head infested with creeping worms and who was shortening his life by uttering numberless lies. In another poem he calls himself a *pulaiya* blessed by Lord Siva while lying outside the temple walls and wailing.¹² He sings of the greatness of God Siva who rescued him from the whirlpool of caste (*kula*) and subcaste (*gotra*)¹³ From all these utterances it is clear that the *pulaiyas* were considered impure outcastes who were not allowed into the temples.

Of the 63 *Nayanmars* whose statues are being erected in all Siva temples, many of them belonged to the lowest untouchable castes. *Enati Nayanar* of *canar* (toddy tapper) caste, *Nanappa Nayanar* of *vettuvur* (hunter) caste, *Atipattar* of *nulayar* (fisherman) caste, *anayar* and *Tirumular* of *itaiyar* (shepherd)

caste, Kaliyar from the *cekkar* (oil pressers) caste, Tirukurippu Tontar from *ekali* caste (washermen) and Nantanar from *pulaiya* or *paraiya* (drumbeaters) caste are all worshipped in Siva temples. Of these Nayanmars the most famous was Kannappan¹⁴ a hunter who applied his own eyes to the bleeding eyes of Lord Siva's *vighraha* (idol) and Nantanar¹⁵ who was admitted into the Nataraja temple of Cidambaram due to the mercy of God. In another case Siva appeared in the form of a *paraiya* with a hide on the back, in a *yagasalai* (sacrificial mound) which made all the brahmanas run away while Somasi Nayanar¹⁶ recognized him, offered *havis* (ghee) to God in the form of a *paraiya* and got his blessings. Thus the early Saivite tradition reveals the utter absence of the caste feeling and notions of untouchability at least among the devotees of God.

The early Vaisnavite Alvars were not a whit behind the early Saivite Nayanmars in their catholic attitude towards caste and untouchability. In fact many of the Alvars hailed from the *sudra* or even untouchable castes. Nammalvar, the most celebrated among them, was a *sudra*, Tiruppanalvar, a *pana* out-caste and Tirumangai Alvar, a tribal chief. Later commentators have declared that Lord Visnu purposely manifested himself in low castes as Alvars, in order to humble the pride of high castes and to demonstrate the truth that caste is not a barrier for the attainment of salvation.¹⁷ In support of their view they point out how Visnu manifested Himself as Krsna in the *itaiya*, a *sudra* caste and as¹⁸ *varaha* (pig) a low-despised animal.

Tontaratippoti Alvar, exhorts the brahmanas to worship a devotee even if he belongs to a degraded caste and warns them that if they insulted such devotees, then they would become *pulaiyas*, or untouchables the moment they do so.¹⁹ Nammalvar, declares that a devotee is to be worshipped, even if he is a *candela* among *candalas* and born in a caste much lower than the four higher castes.²⁰ When Tirupspanalvar was not allowed entry into the temple of Lord Ranganatha of Srirangam, God is said to have appeared in the dream of Lokacaranka Munivar, a brahmana sage, and ordered him to take the Alvar into the temple by carrying him on his shoulders. Lokacaranka obeyed the Lord's command and carried the Alvar on his shoulders into the temple. Thereafter the Alvar came to be called Munivahana or rider of a sage.²¹ Thus, temple entry seems to have been allowed to the untouchables by the Vaisnavites long before the advent of the Temple-entry Movement of modern times. Tirumalaisai Alvar, though he was the son of a *mi* or seer, was brought up in the family of a low caste *piramban* called Tiruvalan. Even then he was adored with great respect by Perumpuliyur Atikal²² who belonged to a high caste.²³ Tirumangai Alvar though a robber by birth became one of the celebrated Alvars, because of his sincere faith and devotion of Lord Visnu.²⁴

Thus, during the early medieval period (up to the tenth century A. D.) that is, that of the Pallavas, we find that untouchability had come to stay in Tamil society and was practiced towards the *pulaiyas* who were not normally allowed into the temples but were allowed only on the intercession of God. Though untouchability was condemned in unequivocal terms by Alvars and Nayanmars, the phenomenon of untouchability came to be practised in Tamil society during the Pallava rule in the Tamil country.

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