

**VANNIYAR CASTE MOVEMENT: A SOCIO-  
POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the Dissertation entitled **VANNIYAR CASTE MOVEMENT: A SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE**, submitted by **K. LAVANYA** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this University or any other University and is a record of the student's own work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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# C O N T E N T S

	PAGES
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i - ii
LIST OF TABLES	iii
CHAPTERS	
I. INTRODUCTION	1 - 18
II. SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE VANNIYARS	19 - 52
III. CRYSTALISATION OF THE VANNIYAR IDENTITY	53 - 69
IV. COLLECTIVE MOBILIZATION AND THE POLITICISATION PROCESS	70 - 103
V. CONCLUSION	104 - 111
B I B L I O G R A P H Y	112 - 114

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LIST OF TABLES

<u>TABLE NO.</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
2.1	ESTIMATES OF VANNIYAR POPULATION	28
2.2	OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF VANNIYARS	39

**C H A P T E R - I**

## Introduction

The present study deals with the **Vanniyar Caste Movement**, from a socio-political perspective. The issue which is focused upon is the curve of the movement within its social, political and economic context. The Vanniyars are a present day Backward Caste in Tamil Nadu. They succeeded in mobilising their caste men to fulfill their demands over reservation.

The significance of the study is that, in the light of the ongoing debates on reservation and backward caste movements, this study helps in perceiving the process of mobilization of a particular backward caste within a democratic polity. So far, no study has given a socio-political perspective to the Vanniyar Caste movement. Hence the present study is a preliminary one in this direction. Thus, the scope of the study, ranges between the social background of the movement which includes the social, economic, educational, political and various other aspects of the Vanniyars in general, the crystallization of the Vanniyar identity and the politicisation process. The study also tries to highlight the stages, methods and techniques of collective mobilization. This chapter further, deals with the theoretical review, the Tamil Nadu social structure, within the frameworks of which the movement is



studied. The hypothesis and the methodology follow suite and is wound up, with the chapter scheme of the Dissertation.

The theoretical issues are dealt with below and though its impossible to fit in every piece of argument, care is taken to include a few important ones. Initially, dealing with the origin of the term 'social movement', it is believed as Ghanshyam Shah puts, "it ..... gained currency in European languages in the early nineteenth century, this was the period of social upheaval. The political leaders and authors who used the term were concerned with the emancipation of exploited classes and the creation of a new society by changing property relationships."<sup>1</sup>

The definition of the concept, as stated in the Encyclopedia, "The term 'Social Movement' or its equivalent in other western languages is being used to denote a wide variety of collective attempts to bring about a change in certain social institutions or to create an entirely new order"<sup>2</sup> While M.S.A. Rao aptly puts it as "...a social movement is an organised attempt on the part of a section of

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1. Ghanshyam Shah, **Social Movements in India - A Review of the Literature** (New Delhi 1990), p.16.
2. **International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences**, vol.14 (London, reprint,1968), p.438.

society to bring about either partial or total change in society through collective mobilization based on an ideology."<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to him a social movement is to have three important characteristics, they are ideology, collective mobilization and orientation toward change.

**T.K. Oommen** defines thus "movements may be viewed as institutionalized collective actions guided by an ideology and supported by an organizational structure. Without mobilization no movement can sustain itself, but, if these mobilizations are uninformed by an ideology and on organizational basis, they cannot be distinguished from elementary forms of collective behaviour like panic response."<sup>4</sup> The important features according to him are institutionalized collective action, ideology, organization and mobilization.

The 'study' of social movements comes next in our purview, Yongendra Singh comments, that, the study of social movements has not only added a new methodological orientation but has also led to innovations to conceptualization and formulation of contexts and categories

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3. M.S.A. Rao, ed., **Social Movements in India** (New Delhi 1984), p.2.

4. **T.K. Oommen, Protest and Change: Studies in Social Movements** (New Delhi, 1990), p.47.

of social change. It makes a significant break from the functional notion of accretion and adaptive change and focuses on those processes of change which have the capacity to bring about a structural transformation in society.<sup>5</sup> T.K. Oommen opines that the focus of attention of a movement study ought to be on mobilization activities and institutionalized segment.

Classification of the movements, as studied by Andre Gunder Frank and Mark Fuentes involves the distinction between, social and political movements. According to them social movements seek more autonomy rather than state power. Political power here is located in the state alone. The objective of these social movements is social transformation.

The study of social movements involves different approaches. Generally studies on social movement follow either a Marxist or a non Marxist framework for analysis, opines, Ghanshyam Shah. Those following the Marxist approach are primarily interested in bringing about revolutionary change in society. According to them, the cause for a social movement is located in the economic structure of the society. They also argue that members of

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5. Yogendra Singh, **Image of Man Ideology and Theory in Indian Sociology**, (New Delhi, 1988), p.97.

the same class have common interests and share common consciousness, this in turn facilitates their collective action. A group of Marxist historians, the 'sub-altern studies' group studies history from below. They criticise the 'traditional' Marxist historians for ignoring the history of the masses, as if the 'sub altern' classes do not make history of their own, depending solely on the advanced classes or the elite for organization and guidance. It is thus argued that the traditional Marxist scholars have undermined cultural factors and viewed a linear development of class consciousness.

On the other hand, the subaltern studies historians are strongly criticized by other Marxist scholars, for ignoring structural factors and viewing 'consciousness' as independent of structural contradictions. There is a considerable amount of variation among the non-marxist scholars too.

It is argued by William Kornhavser, Robert Nisbet and Edward Shils that mass movements are the product of mass societies which are extremists and antidemocratic. While a few scholars assert that the mass movements are redundant in the Indian culture and civilisation due to its 'Multilinear character' and 'all-pervasive hierarchy'. They also believe that within the brahminical ideology and hierarchical social

structure, the oppressed classes have become docile, obedient and fatalist as considered by Moore, Pratap Chandra and Badrinath.

A few other scholars like Kathleen Gough, Thapar, Damle and Dhanagere refute, the above argument while pointing to a number of struggles by the oppressed classes in pre and post independence India, which was the result of conflict between tradition and modernity.<sup>6</sup>

"Rajini Kothari argued that 'direct action' is inevitable in the context of India's present-day parliamentary democracy"<sup>7</sup> He feels that mass mobilization at the grass roots level is both necessary and desirable.

The theory of relative deprivation has also guided some studies on agitations and mass movements. Limitations of the theory are pointed out by a number of Indian scholars. MSA Rao asserts that relative deprivation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for protest movements.<sup>8</sup> T.K. Oommen is also of the opinion that the deprivation theorists view movements as 'temporary

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6. Shah, n.1, p.17.

7. ibid., p.25.

8. ibid., p.26.

aberrations' rather than an "ongoing processes of change". Deprivation is considered primarily psychological' by Ghur which explains, him not, dealing with the socio-economic structure which is the source of deprivation as Shah views it.

For Partha Mukherji social movements are accumulative, alternative and transformatory. Accumulative changes are changes within the given structure and system. MSA Rao also offers more or less similar typologies: "Reformist transformatory and Revolutionary." However T.K. Oommen believes that, the movements will neither have the potentialities to root out the existing system completely, nor will they succumb to the traditional structures entirely. His typologies are related to the process of movement crystallization, the life style and the phases of social movements. For him, movements are charismatic, ideological and organizational.<sup>9</sup>

Ghanshyam Shah classified social movements into eight types on the basis of the socio-economic characteristics of the participants and the issues involved. They are:

- (i) Protest Movements
- (ii) Tribal Movements

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9.       ibid., p.27

- (iii) Dalit Movements
- (iv) Backward Caste Movements
- (v) Workers Movements
- (vi) Students Movements
- (vii) Middle Class Movements
- (viii) Industrial Working Class Movements<sup>10</sup>

MSA Rao classifies movements based on the locus of the movements as linguistic, religious, sectarian, caste, peasant worker, tribal, ethnic, feministic and student movements, also classified on the basis of scale and spatial spread, all India or regional, and further classified on the basis of the dominant issue of interests, such as temperance women's liberation and as a distinctive expressive art form.<sup>11</sup>

The study here deals with a caste movement, more so a backward class movement. The backward classes are those who are granted special provisions under the Indian constitution. Further, they are classified into scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and the others as the other backward classes. As MSA Rao describes, a caste movement has to tackle the problem of establishing a new identity, to

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10.     ibid., p.32.

11.     Rao, n.3, p.20.

project a kind of image that would give them self-respect, honour and status. In his study on the backward caste movements, MSA Rao divides the non-upper castes/classes into three categories. The uppermost category of the backward castes consists mostly of land owners. There are several such castes in different parts of the country, such as the Jat, the Ahir, the Gujjar in Punjab, the Maratha in Maharashtra, the Vellala in Madras, the Kamma, the Kapu and the Reddi in Andhra Pradesh, the Vokkaliga and the Bant in Karnataka. Ranking below them are the tenant cultivators, artisans and other service castes. They include the Ahir, the Kahar in Bihar, the Koli in Gujarat and the Vaddar in South India. They are considered caste Hindus above the pollution line. They have not enjoyed political power in the recent past. Most of them are small or marginal farmers, tenants or agricultural labourers. The former often extorted forced labour from the latter as domestic servants and palanguin bearers and expected several customary payments (free gifts) on various festivals. At the bottom are the untouchable castes who are designated as the scheduled castes under the constitution of India.<sup>12</sup>

The other backward classes organised themselves in different parts of India, establishing new identities based

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12. Shah, n.1, pp.121-22.



on different ideologies MSA Rao points out three ideologies - firstly reinterpretation and recasting of appropriate mythologies of origin, secondly a variety of protest ideology based on the rejection of the brahminical Aryan religion and culture and thirdly, the civil rights ideology, based on democracy, motivated the backward classes to evolve campaign to fight for equality in educational, economic and political opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

The classifications of the backward caste movements, as suggested by T.K. Oommen include:

- (i) Status mobility movements
- (ii) Caste unity movements
- (iii) Caste welfare movements

Further, he classifies, status mobility movements into adaptive movements, movements oriented to cultural revolts and counter cultural movements.<sup>14</sup> MSA Rao classifies four types of movements on the basis of structural cleavages and manifest conflicts. The first type, being those led by the upper non brahmin caste, such as the vellala, the Reddi and the Kamma of old Madras presidency, the Vokkaliga and the lingayat of Mysore and the

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13. Rao, n.3, p.21.

14. Oommen, n.4, p.67.

Maratha of Maharashtra, Ramaswamy Naicker's self-respect movement in Madras in the late 1920s to perform marriage ceremonies without Brahmin priests. These movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu raised cultural issues and the leaders have attacked caste and condemned it as a tool of Brahmin oppression. The next type of backward caste movements were those led by intermediate and low caste, such as the Ahir and Kurmi in Bihar, the Noniya in Punjab, the Koli in Gujarat and the Mali in Maharashtra. The third type of movement is that led by the depressed classes or untouchables, against the upper and the other backward castes and the tribal movements form the fourth type of movement.<sup>15</sup>

The movements comparability includes the pan-Indian phenomena of caste association, the process within the association and the caste associations relationship with the other institutions. These aspects are subsequently discussed. Membership in a caste is no doubt purely ascriptive, but is not so in the case of membership in the caste association. Birth within a caste is a necessity but is not all, it definitely means, the individual involving in various degrees of identification like attending all caste association meets, voting for candidates supported by the

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15. Rao, n.3, p.20.

caste Association, paying membership due and the individual ought to "join" the (Rajput) Kshatriya Mahasabha or the (jat) kissan sabha.

The purpose of the caste Association is wide ranging, reflecting the process within the caste, it affects almost every walk of the member's life, with its social economic and political activities. The Association plays a liberating role in the above mentioned three spheres. For instance, the Shanas, a toddy tapping caste of Tamil Nadu rioted against several customary rules, as exemplified in Chapter-3. They succeeded in lifting the ban on their women wearing the upper cloth but could not succeed on the issue of the temple entry. Further, as Rudolph and Rudolph put it "the caste association brings political democracy to Indian village through the familiar and accepted institution of caste."<sup>16</sup> They communicated to the laymen, in their language relating to problems at grassroot level to their ideology and claims.

Leadership is no longer bequeathed by hereditary. It requires essential qualifications of articulating, effectively representing the association, and democratic

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16. Lloyd, I. Rodolph and Susanne Hoerber Rudolph, "Political Role of India's Caste Associations", *Pacific Affairs* (Harvard) March 1960, no.xxxiii, p.9.

cognisance. The organizational level too, moving swiftly toward efficient offices, catalogued membership, bureaucratic set up, publications, conferences, resolutions etc., goes without mention.

Sumit Sarkar, discussing the various aspects, comments that the varied contradictions of Indian society often found expression through caste association and movements which could be divisive and basically conservative but at times also potentially quite radical.<sup>17</sup> For instance, he picks up the anti-brahman justice party, its making dyarchy a success, preparing a counter elite, emphasising on job reservations, sankritising and other radical plebian movements, 'Periyar' and radical alternative to justice elitism and his self respect movement, advocating weddings without Brahman priests, forcible temple entry, burning of the Manusmriti and outright atheism. He also throws light on the SNDP movement where Sri Narayana Guru encouraged the Ezhavas - the toddy tapping caste of Kerala to scale the barricades and enter all the temples. Radical Ezhavas like K. Aiyappan and C. Kesavan found temple entry a minor issue while emphasising their outspoken atheism.

The positive impacts apart, the caste association is criticised bitterly on the other end for its negatives

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17. Sumit Sarkar, **Modern India: 1885-1947** (New Delhi 1983), p.242.

originating basically from the economic planners, the servants and political ideologues who deduce policy from theories of economic development, conceptions of the public good and Utopian visions of a new society.<sup>18</sup> This apart, the Rudolphs also point out that its tendency to place group loyalties above merit and competence and caste patriotism above the public runs counter to both liberal and democratic values and jeopardises the effectiveness of the governments' vital functions.<sup>19</sup>

Such being the relationship between the association and the other institutes or associations outside the association, the departure of the caste movement will now be highlighted with the social structure of Tamil Nadu on one hand and the social context of the movement on the other.

Predominant in the Tamil Nadu social structure, is the three-fold grouping of castes into the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins, referred to as the Shudras, and the Adi-Dravidas or the Harijans. As **Andre Beteille** defines, "the term **brahmin** refers to a congeries of castes and sub-castes" the "three main Brahminical categories" are "those who officiate as Priests for non-Brahmins, those who serve as temple priests, those who were traditionally devoted to

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18. Rudolph and Rudolph, n.16, p.10.

19. *ibid.*, p.11.

learning and the study of the shastras - the scriptures of Hinduism. The last is recognised as the highest and intermarriage among the above categories is not a practice at all."<sup>20</sup>

The strata which follows is that of Non-Brahmins which is more diverse and is the largest of the divisions, and are considered less 'sanskritic' than the Brahmans. "The Non-Brahmans" according to Bêteille "include, mainly land-owning and cultivating castes such as the Vellalas, Gaundars and Padayachis; trading castes such as the Kusavans (Potters), Tachchans (carpenters) and Tattans (Goldsmiths), servicing castes such as Ambattan (barbers) and Vannans (washermen) as well as large number of other specialist castes. One or more of these castes will be found to be particularly influential or dominant in every district. Thus the Mudaliyars are dominant in Chengleput, the Padaiyachis in North Arcot and South Arcot, the Gaundars in Coimbatore, and so on."<sup>21</sup>

The third strata comprising of Adi Dravidas, is pointed by Bêteille, "as Scheduled Castes, they have special position and status guaranteed to them by the Indian

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20. Andre Beteille, **Caste, Class and Power - Changing Patterns of Stratification** (Berkeley, 1965), p.10.

21. *ibid.*, p.11.

constitution. The Adi Dravidas have been both economically and socially depressed."<sup>22</sup>

Now, moving on to the methods involved, the curve of the movement was studied keeping in mind the factors of the social movements put forth by T.K. Oommen and M.S.A. Rao. They include institutionalised collective action, ideology, organisation, collective mobilization and orientation toward change.

The sources used for the study, apart from books relating to the subject matter, are several archival documents like the census reports, imperial gazetteers, district gazetteers, Backward Classes Commission reports, caste publications and press clippings.

The difficulty, if any, was the fact of not having provision for a field study and the Vanniyar caste association for not having entertained the researcher for the only fact of not being a Vanniyar by caste. This seriously hindered, delayed and discouraged the researcher at several stages.

The hypotheses put forth in the study are:

1. that the backwardness of the caste, motivates, the

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22. *ibid.*, p.12.

- castemen to achieve their goals of separate reservation, particularly, when they are reminded of their royal lineage;
2. the social bonds and relationships formed a network of communications which led to the crystallization of the caste identity; and
  3. the politicisation process helped achieve their goals.

The essential issues discussed in the subsequent chapters of the study follows. The study, develops the theme by sketching the social background of the caste movement in Chapter-2. In this section, is discussed the origin of the Vanniyar caste and arguments from several spheres, a general introduction about the Vanniyar's their other names, sub castes and population. Their social life is also highlighted, following suite is their economic background and the political context within which we ought to understand their demand for the most backward label for reservation.

The subsequent chapter, i.e. Chapter-3, is dwelt upon the issue of caste identity wherein is traced the crystallization of the Vanniyar identity. The central issue of the chapter is the Caste Association, its objectives, activities, and their publications. The crystallization of



the identity evolved when the caste men began to work together. Further, the issue of sanskritisation and that of rejecting sanskritisation by the Vanniyars is also touched upon.

Chapter-4 puts forth the politicisation process and the collective mobilization which gathered momentum in the closing years of the last decade. While Chapter-5 concludes the dissertation.

**C H A P T E R - I I**

## The Social Background

This Chapter deals with the background of the caste movement, highlighting the Vanniyars social life, their economic conditions and the political context of their movement.

### Tracing the Vanniyars origin

The Vanniyar origin, is substantiated with several mythological, historical and literary arguments. Though 1871 census refers to them as "... the exceedingly numerous agricultural labourers. It is non-aryan. It is considered subordinate to the Vellalar"<sup>1</sup> the native Pallis - the earlier name for the vanniyars - had published several books and pamphlets tracing themselves as descendants of the fire races - the Agni Kulas - of the Kshatriyas and that the Tamil Pallis were at one time the shepherd kings of Egypt.

As Edgar Thurston points out in a series of questions promulgated by the census superintendent, it was stated that the existence of these fire races, Agnikula or Vahnikula - the Vanniyar in North and South India is a remarkable fact. No one can refuse to a scion of the non-

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1. Government of India Census Report (Madras, 1892), p.81.

Aryan warrior tribe the title of Rajputra, but in so doing we establish at once aryan and non-aryan Rajputras or Rajput. The vanniyaars of South India may be accepted as a representative of the non-aryan Rajput element.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Mythological Argument**

The mythological argument of the Vanniyar origin as Thurston highlights in his writing,

"I gather, from a note by Mr. F.R. Hemingway, that the Pallis tell a long story of how they are descendants of one Vira Vanniyar who was created by a sage named Sambaha when he was destroying two demons named Vatapi and Entapi. This Vira Vanniyar married a daughter of the God Indra and had five sons named Rudra, Brahma, Krishna, Sambuha and Koi whose descendants now live respectively in the country north of the Palar in the Cavery delta, between the Palar and Pennar. They have written a puranam and a drama bearing on this tale. They declared that they are superior to Brahmans, since, while the latter must be invested with the sacred thread after birth,

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2. Edgar Thurston, **Castes and Tribes of Southern India** (Madras, 1908), vol.6, p.3.

they bring their sacred thread with them at birth itself.<sup>3</sup>

On their contemporary social conditions, there are several arguments for their humble agriculturist status. For, according to Dr, Oppert, the Pallis, form at the moment on the whole, a highly respectable class, living partly as agriculturists in the country and partly as citizens in towns. They belong to the caste of the Vanniyar, the word Vanniyar is generally derived from the Sanskrit Vahni, fire. Agni, the God of fire, is connected with the regal office, as kings hold in their hands, the firewheel or Agneya chakra and the Vanniyars urge in support of their names the regal descent they claim, for they contend that the Pandyakings belonged to their race.<sup>4</sup>

Further, T.A. Nayakar's Vanniyakula Villaka's - A Treatise On The Vanniyar Caste - main purpose was to trace the caste's descent to the Kshatriyas and prove their considerably higher position in the social stratification as against the projection in 1871 census report, which states that, the Vanniyars are the descendants of the kings of the Agnikula race. But these kings, as depicted in the

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3. ibid., pp.5-6.

4. ibid., p.25.



histories of Ceylon and other countries had been subjugated by the Muhammadan and English conquests, lost their power, took to village and other humble occupations and began to live in hamlets and villages.<sup>5</sup> While this serves as an argument from the caste association's point of view, the census officials on the other hand put forth their argument. Mr. Nelson, in his Manual of Madura District states thus....

the Vanniyars are at the present time a small and obscure agricultural caste, but, there is reason to believe that they are descendants of ancestors who, in former times, held a good position among the tribes of South India. A manuscript abstracted at page 90 of the Catalogue raisonne' (Mackensie Manuscripts), states that the Vanniyars belong to the Agnikula, and are descended from the Muni Sambhu; and that they gained victories by means of their skill archery. And another manuscript abstracted at page 427 shows that two of their chiefs enjoyed customary tribute to the Rayar, who was for a long time unable to reduce them to submission. Armies of Vanniyars are often mentioned in Ceylon annals.<sup>6</sup>

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5. T.A. Nayakar, **Vanniyakula Villakan** (Madras 1988), p.48.
  6. Nelson, "The Manual of the Madura District", in Thurston, n.2, p.6.

The above extract from the district manual emphasizes the Vanniyars royal lineage. Now, we shall discuss the historical evidences which supplements the above mythological argument of the Vanniyar's, past day Kshatriya status.

### **Historical Evidences**

Historical evidences run into many inscriptions and historical records. The renowned historian Dr. Neelakanda Shastri in his book, entitled "Cholan" talks about the victorious general called Karunakarathonda Vanni under the first Kulothungacholan.

Further, T.A. Nayakar in his Vanniyakula Vilakkam quotes from Rev-William Taylor's Catalogue Raisonne about the Vanniyar rulers which runs ... Candavarayen and Chethurayan two Vanniyar sovereigns who ruled in the fort of Tiruvidaichuram in Chingleput, says, in those days the Vannier or Palli people by permission of the ruler of the country, built this fort for themselves, as their own. But they paid tribute to the sovereigns of the Andhra, Carnata and Dravidian countries.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Rev. William Taylor, "Catalogue Raisonne", in T.A. Nayakar, n.5, p.11.

Copper <sup>and</sup> stone inscriptions and engravings discovered in Ramnad Record prove that the Vanniyars were formerly the chiefs of eighteen forts. Vanniyars are also mentioned in the Ceylon Archives and Wannai is the name of district which they ruled. An inscription of Tiruchuram in 1189 shows a general's name suffixed with Vanniyar Nayakan. Vanniyars were also referred to as "Sambu" and "Sambu-Varayar". The later day Pallavas too, had suffixed their names with "Sambuvarayar". These being the historical evidences, we shall now pass on to study the literary sources.

### **Literary Sources**

In the tenth century literary works, most of them used the word "Vanni" with reference to the "King", so was used the word Palli. Most well known works like "Manimegalai", "Purananuru", Kallandananar's "Kallada", Jayakondar's "Kalingathuparani", Kambar's "Karunakarathoda" and "Silai Elupathu", Kadigai Muthu's "Thickvijayam", Eratteiyar's Kattiyakothu, "Pugalendi's "Kathavarayan Kalambagam" have mentioned Vanniyars as rulers or warriors. Kambar, a well known writer, has in his above mentioned "Silai Elupathu" traced the lineage of Vanniyars to that of the Pallava kings.

Though the Vanniyars were mostly a humble and obscure agricultural caste, there is every evidence in the form of



literary, historical, mythological and archival arguments to prove their royal lineage amongst the castes in Southern India.

#### **Various Vanniyar Names**

The Vanniyars were known by different names, specially, indicating authority, superiority and bravery, they are Rayar, Nayakar, Varma, Bhoopathy, Padaiyachi, Kandar, Thantriyar, Samarthiyar, Aryathasingam, Valandiyar, Pandavathar, Palan, Samboo, Chera, Chola, Pandya, Nayanar, Maghuvar, Udaiyar, Reddiyar, Sembier or Sambuvarayar, Kachchi Kachichirayar, Gaunder, Pillar, Rasaliar, Malavaraya, Venanka Mudaliar, Valandayar, Palliyar, Pandienar, Palayakarar, Chempienar, Porayar, BoomiKudaiyar, Samarthiar, Rastramundar, Arasu, Palliars, Annalankarar, Swaniar, Nattar and Rudthedhar etc., all running to around hundred odd names. Further, especially the northern districts, where the Vanniyar population concentrates, they are prevalently referred to by different names in these four districts. For instance, they are referred to as Nayakars in North Arcot and Chingleput districts, as Padaiyachis in South Arcot and East Tanjore and as Gaunders in Coimbatore district.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Junior Vikadan (Madras), 30 September 1987, p.18.

## The Vanniyar Sub-castes

"The Vanniyars are either of the solar and Lunar or Agnikular race of Ruthra Vanniyar, Krishna Vannigar, Samboo Vanniyar, Brahma Vanniyar and Indra Vanniyar."<sup>9</sup>

The most important sub castes returned at the 1891 census were the Agamudaiyan, Agni, Arasu (Raja), Kshatriya, Nagavadam, Nattaman, Olai, Pandamuttu, <sup>and</sup> Perumal gotra. Further, other sub-castes mentioned in the 1901 census were the Kallangir in Chingleput district, with the title of Reddi, Kallaveli or Kallan in the Madura district and Kottas or Bricklayer from the Coimbatore district. In Salem district there were four sub-castes as mentioned by Thurston, they are the Anjunal Pallis who performed the final death ceremonies on the fifth day of the incident, Pannedunal Pallies who perform it on the twelfth day, the Olai Pallis, who normally wear a circular shaped traditional ornament and the Nagavadam Pallis who bedecked themselves with a cobra-shaped jewel.

### District-wise distribution

The Vanniyars thickly populate the northern districts of Tamil Nadu, that is, South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem and

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9. Thurston, n.2, p.14.

Dharmapuri. The Vanniyars form a majority in the districts of Madras, Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Dharmapuri, Trichy, Tanjore and form a minority in Periyar, Coimbatore, Madurai, Anna and Nellore. They are also found to be distributed in other districts.<sup>10</sup>

### **Population and Vanniyars**

The Vanniyars, claim, that they constitute about 30% of the states population. Contrary to their claims, they account for only 11.66% of the total state population and 14.35% of the non-scheduled caste population. In the South Arcot district, which is a Vanniyar dominated district in the state, they constitute about 37% of the total population and about 50% of the non-scheduled caste population. According to the recent, Tamil Nadu's Second Backward Classes Commission Report - the Ambasankar Report - the Vanniyars amount to 12% of the total state population and 19% of the backward classes population. The following table reflects the estimates of the Vanniyar population gathered from the Tamil Nadu governments first backward classes commission report - the A.N. Sattanathan Commission's Report.

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10. Dr. C. Ramdoss, **Engal Porattan Etharkaaka?** (Why do we struggle?), (Trichy 1988), p.12.

TABLE 2.1

## ESTIMATES OF VANNIYAR POPULATION

District	Population			Proportion to Total population	Proportion to non-SC population
	1971	1981	1987		
Chingleput	5,77,397	7,18,859	8,02,143	19.39	26.94
North Arcot	9,52,211	11,11,420	12,41,344	22.05	31.43
South Arcot	13,36,596	15,51,326	17,25,141	36.87	49.88
Salem	9,06,483	10,52,789	11,71,438	19.31	22.88
Tamil Nadu	48,61,742	56,71,222	63,34,137	11.66	14.35

Source: Sattanadhan Commission Report, 1971.

### Social Life of Vanniyars

We shall now discuss several aspects of the Vanniyar social life, like, their marriage practices kinship patterns, religious belief, their system of social distance, education their economic background, and the political context of their caste movement.

### Marriage

Infant marriage was a freak occurrence among the Vanniyars and adult marriage was normally followed as a

rule. The mother's brother, plays an important role, only after his approval, the bride is given in marriage to any groom. Vanniyars are an endogamous group. In a recent study on the Vanniyars in the Kumaramangalam village of South Arcot district, the Scholar Malcolm Redgers reports, that they marry within a group of eighteen villages at Sethiyathope and Bmuttur. Elsewhere too, the concept of the group of eighteen villages is conspicuous. For instance, among the Kallars, as pointed out by Dr. Karuppaiyan, in his thesis, "Kinship and Polity among the upland Kallars of Tanjore district." While Dr. Karuppaiyan argues for the auspiciousness of the number eighteen, Rodger's assessment runs otherwise.

Rodger's assessment is that, in all these endogamous village groups, only, the dominant caste observes this practice, for instance, in Kumaramangalam, the other castes like the Udaiyars, Naidus, Scheduled castes etc... do not practice this. Rodgers prefers a historical explanation to an anthropological one. During the Nayaka Period of Tamil history, between thirteenth century and sixteenth century, the country was split into *Palayams* or *fiefdoms* given to the territorial chieftans or the Poligars who were referred to as *Pallayakarar* during the British rule. These chiefs were given a dominion over a few villages, known as *Padaipatru* or "tenure by military service". The Nayak of Senji gave

eighteen villages of Kumaramangalam to the Poligar of Devakottai during the sixteenth century. This could have been the origin of those endogamous group of eighteen villages, according to Rodgers.

The Vanniyars always performed a Betrothal ceremony, following which was the ceremony of marriage. The prevalently preferred marriages in the Vanniyarvillages are, the paternal cross cousin, the maternal cross cousin, uncle niece and exchange of sisters or classificatory sisters.

Further, as Thurston describes, widow remarriage was permitted. At the marriage of a widow, the tali is tied by a married woman, the bridegroom standing by the side, usually, inside the house. Widow remarriage is known as naduvittu tali, as the tali tying ceremony takes place within the house (naduvidu).<sup>11</sup> Here, 'tali' refers to the Mangal suthram and 'naduvidu' refers to the central place of the house.

### **Kinship Pattern**

The Kumaramangalam village, exhibits two basic kinship networks, among the Vaniyars, the *Pangali* network and the *Sammandi* network. Pangali refers to the agnates, men whose "fathers" were "brothers" and whose "fathers" are

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11. Thurston, n.2, pp.21-22.

"brothers" while samandi refers to "cross cousins" or affinal. Pangali network is associated with marriage with one's sisters daughters of all kinds. Sammandi network, on the other hand, is associated with one's mama's (uncle's) sisters or his daughters. An Ego, here, can marry the daughter of his female parallel cousin, but not one's male parallel cousin.

### **Religion**

The Vanniyars, are by and large a religious lot. As recorded by Thurston, "the Pallis were Saivites or Vaishnavites but are also demolators and worship Mutyalamma, Mariamma, Ayanar, Muneswara, Ankalama and other minor dieties."<sup>12</sup> Here, the term 'saivite' refers to those who primarily worship Lord Shiva and the term 'Vaishnavite' to those who primarily worship Lord Vishnu. Among the Vanniyars in Kumaramangalam, the 'Sai Baba cult and the concept of "Ishta Deva" or chosen God is more prevalent. So, is the case of family Gods, "Kula Thevam" and village deities.

### **The Social Distance**

Social distance, is based on the purity-pollution belief and forms an indigenious part of every South Indian

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12.    ibid., p.15.

village. As Kathleen Gough points out, "the formal ranking of castes is defined in terms of the belief in ritual purity and pollution, rules of social distance between castes were primarily from this belief."<sup>13</sup>

The Vanniyars usually live in a street specifically meant for them. Thurston describes it as "the Pallis live in separate streets or quarters distinctively known as the *Palliteru* or *Kuditero* (ryots' quarter)."<sup>14</sup> Rodgers, in his field report of Kumaramanglam, has observed a four fold pattern. They constitute the Padaiyachi street, exclusively for the Padaiyatchis except a Konar Pillai whose father was allowed to settle there. The next street was mainly composed of immigrants, Udaipars who are mainly potters in the South Arcot district. The Vetan or Irula colony lived on a wasteland near the village common land or poramboke. Occupationally, they were mere agricultural labourers. Last comes the cheri colony, for the scheduled castes, with its own well, school, shop, temple and tank. While most of them were agricultural labourers some were also land owners. This spatial pattern of the settlement in Kumaramanglam

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13. Kathleen Gough, "Caste in Tanjore Village" in E.R. Leach, ed., **Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and West Pakistan** (New York, 1973), p.40.

14. Thurston, n.2, p.16.



reflects the strict social distance formula followed. Even till today, this aspect of purity-pollution belief, seems to be in vogue, in the northern districts of Tamil Nadu. For instance, as Dr. Ramdoss, the caste association leader states in one of their caste publications, "the Vellalas don't even eat food cooked in a Padaeyachis house."<sup>15</sup>

### **Education**

The Chennai Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam established in 1888, did involve itself in the educational betterment of its fellow caste men. The erudites opened seven schools of which three were situated in Madras and others at Kanchipuram, Madhurantakem, Tirakalikundram and Kamalam. The Chengalvaraya Nayakar's Technical school attached to the Pachai ppas' college in Madras, was established in 1865 by a Palli. He also founded an orphanage named after him, for palli boys. The Govindappa Nayakars school which forms the lower secondary branch of pachaiyappa's college, was also established by a palli.

### **The Economic Background**

The first decade of the century found the Vanniyars as merchants, cultivators, bullock and pony cartdrivers,

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15. Dr. Ramdoss, n.10, p.10.

printers, lascars, sweetmeat vendors, flower vendors, fitters, sawyers, oil-pressers, gardeners polishers, bricklayers and mason as accounted by Thurston. Sketching the economic background, of vanniyars, we shall focus on their main occupations and the occupational pattern of the northern districts where their population is rather high.

In the four northern districts of North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem and Dharmapuri, 69% to 78% of the work force is still dependent on agriculture and there has been no marked shift in the occupation structure. This indicates no significant new employment outlets and thus we shall look for greater details in the agrarian transformation.

On the agrarian front these districts are in a comfortable position. There is a clear pattern of growth in irrigation, especially in Chingleput, North Arcot and South Arcot districts. The major source of irrigation until the 1960s were tanks, following this, was the well irrigation pattern, then came the lift irrigation through electrically operated pump-sets and oil engines. This was the developmental gradation between 1966 and 1982 among the northern districts.<sup>16</sup>

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16. M. Udayakumar, "Irrigation and Cropping Intensity in Tamil Nadu - A Districtwise Analysis" (M.phil Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) p.2.

The significant development in well irrigation and marginal change in the cultivated area is explained by the fact that there is a significant change in the cropping pattern. Perennial, annual, long duration crops and paddy are taking the place of coarse grains, pulses and oilseeds. The shift is towards crops which are dependent on more and assured water supply.<sup>17</sup> The rise in the productivity level too reflects the impact of irrigation on cultivation.

Among the thirty nine districts of high-growth rates in India, South Arcot and Chingleput districts are said to be high growth areas with over 4.5% growth. Each having a growth rate of 5.28% and 4.59% respectively, while North-Arcot and Salem (including Dharmapuri) records a 3.21% and 2% respectively.<sup>18</sup> The available evidence shows that the real wages tended to remain stagnant over the period 1950-51 to 1980-81, especially in the northern districts.<sup>19</sup> This condition partly explains the limited impact of irrigation sources and cropping patterns on employment opportunities.

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17. *ibid.*, p.68.

18. S. Mahendra Dev, "Direction of Change in Performance of all crops in Indian Agriculture in Late 1970s: A Look at the level of Districts and Agro Climatic Region", **Economic and Political Weekly** (December 1985), p.135.

19. R. Vidyasagar, "Vanniyar's Agitation" **Economic and Political Weekly** (March 1988), p.508.

To study, the trends in land ownership and the position of Vanniyars, village studies on the thickly Vanniyar populated northern districts of Tamil Nadu are discussed below. Though we cannot generalise on the basis of a few village studies, yet they give a broad view of the position of Vanniyars.

T.K. Sundari, in her study of twenty two villages of the Chingleput district concludes that the decline of Brahmins and Mudaliars (the two dominant castes) is marked by the significant rise of the Vanniyars. In seven villages where the former castes have moved out of the village, the Vanniyars have ascended to become the single largest land owning class while in two villages vanniyars are replaced by some other castes.<sup>20</sup> Although, her study indicates that a section among Vanniyars have consolidated their position, stratification within this caste is also noted. She has mentioned that the bulk of the marginally landed agricultural wage labourers are drawn from among Vanniyars.<sup>21</sup>

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20. T.K. Sundari, "Caste and Agrarian Structure - A Study of Chingleput District" (Ph.d. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for Developmental Studies, Trivandrum 1985), p.310.

21. *ibid.*, p.319.

A study of the North Arcot district where the Vanniyars constitute a bulk of the population also indicates the consolidation of their position as far as land ownership was concerned. "In 1913, this community owned only 3.9% of the total land and in 1983 constituting 69.3% of the population they owned 70.64% of the land in the village. But among the Vanniyar population 52.3% of the households were landless in 1983 and among the landholding households, land is not equally distributed."<sup>22</sup> A majority of a non-traditional weaving community, especially vanniyars have taken to handloom weaving in the village. Out of 326 weaving households 291 were drawn from Vanniyars and among them 199 households combined both weaving and agriculture as their occupations. It has been pointed out that the unreliable and uncertain agriculture of the village has worked as a push factor among a few other reasons."<sup>23</sup> This study also points that, "62.4% of the Vanniyar population were still illiterates in 1983."<sup>24</sup>

A village survey in South Arcot, where Vanniyars constituted the bulk of the population noted the skewed land

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22. Guhan and Bharathan, Dusi - Resurvey Madras Institute of Development in R. Vidyasagar, **Economic and Political Weekly**, *ibid.*, n.19, p.509.

23. *ibid.*, pp.124, 167.

24. *ibid.*, p.30.

distribution in the village 38.9% of the land was owned by a single upper caste land owner and among Vanniyars one household owned over 25 acres. The rest of the land was unequally distributed.<sup>25</sup>

The above studies reveal that there is a considerable improvement in the conditions of Vanniyars. However it seems only a particular section among the Vanniyars have benefited out of these developments whereas a majority of them still remain as marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, handloom weavers, etc. Vanniyars who are pushed out of the villages also work as head load workers, rickshaw pullers, etc... in the nearby towns.<sup>26</sup>

These being the occupational positions of the Vanniyars, a publication of their caste association<sup>27</sup> also states their occupational pattern which is sketched in the following table (Table 2.2).

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25. Vidyasagar, n.19, p.509.

26. *ibid.*, p.510.

27. Dr. Ramdoss, n.10, p.15.

TABLE - 2.2

## Occupational Distribution of Vanniyars

POSTS	Total Number	No. occupied by Vanniyars
District Collectors	20	None
Secretaries - Secretariat	36	None
Superintendent of Police	23	None
District Judges	25	None
Vice-Chancellors of Universities	10	None
Joint Secretaries	30	None
Deputy Secretaries	17	None
1936 Munsiff posts	52	None
IAS Officers	292	5
High Court Judges	25	2
IPS Officers	160	3
Under Secretaries	176	3
Directors	49	2
Co-operative Director	18	2
High Ranks Tamil Nadu Services (Approximately)	5000	25
High Ranks Indian Union (Approximately)	50000	5
Small Scale Industries	76444	35
Large & Middle Scale Industries	2000	None

Source: Dr. Ramdoss "Why do we Struggle?"

## **The Political Context**

To study the political context of the Vanniyar caste movement, it is essential to build up the history of backward classes and reservations with particular reference to Tamil Nadu. Working out the history, we shall have to look back at the Pre-independence or the British period of our history.

The 'Backward Classes' as explained by Dr. P. Radhakrishnan, "is now a generic, much hackneyed and much controverted term applied to three distinct categories of the Indian population, viz., scheduled tribes, scheduled castes and other backward classes or just backward classes as a more familiar usage, who are entitled to the special treatment provisions of the Indian constitution. Though this term thus assumes measures and significance in the constitutional context, it had begun to evolve more than a century ago."<sup>28</sup>

## **Origin of Backward Classes**

The origin of the term "Backward Classes" could be traced to the fact that it referred to certain educational categories of the British administration when it realised

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28. P. Radhakrishnan, "Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu: 1872-1988", **Madras Institute of Developmental Studies, Working Paper no.89** (Madras 1989), p.1.



that shaping men of the high castes in the Macaulay Mould of 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect' was not the only motivating desire of its educational policy in India.

This realisation, is farther reflected in the Court of Directors Despatch of 18th July 1854, where they considered the fact, that if, "how useful and practical knowledge suited to every station in life, might be best conveyed to the great mass of the people, who are utterly incapable of obtaining any education worthy of the name by their unaided efforts." Following the above despatch was the government of India Resolution of 1871 which declared special treatment for Muslims in education and employment avenues. While muslims were the first to be treated as backward classes in 1872, following them, the Oriyas in the state too, received fee concessions. Thus, the saga of backward classes which began a decade earlier, sprung out of the context of the Education of the lower strata of society who, by then, had practically no access even to primary education. Apart from the Brahmins the other hindus who benefited from education were mostly from the upper strata of the society.

## The Education Commission

The education commission was formulated in 1882 and classified the "classes requiring special treatment" as that of the chiefs and nobles on the one hand and the aborigines were termed the scheduled tribes, the untouchable low castes as schedule castes, the poorer classes were those who are called so, for "want of civilisation, lowness of castes, loss of political status and extreme poverty." It is in this context of the historically accumulated deprivation that the commission's recommendations on their education and the emergence of the backward classes categories have to be understood.<sup>29</sup>

Several financial aids were meted out to the poor pupils. The Grant-in-aid code of 1893 meted out aid to those families whose ordinary monthly income did not exceed Rs.8/- in the Madras Municipality, Rs.6/- in the district municipalities and Rs.4/- in the non-municipal areas. The Grant-in-aid code of 1895 specified an ordinary monthly income which did not exceed Rs.7/- for aid. The Grant-in-aid code of 1901 specified the limit of ordinary monthly income of Rs.8/- and Rs.7/- for an European pupil. The director of Public Instruction further regulated aids on two

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29. *ibid.*, p.7.

conditions. Firstly, that concession was given to pupils of specific classes and secondly a "wealth limit" was prescribed i.e. less than Rs.500/- per annum.

This apart, there were free admissions too. In 1884, 5% of the aggregate number of pupils were granted free admission in school and 20% in college. In 1886, it was raised to 15% in schools. The most popular half-fee concessions were launched in 1884, though only selectively to begin with.

### **Backward classes and Backward races/castes**

The term backward races first appeared in 1833 which also refers to aborigines and low castes for special treatment. Exemptions and relaxations for these two categories were primarily intended to induce the schools to enroll more students of these classes and by 1891 the Department of Public Instruction found it necessary to offer more inducements.

While enumerating the backward classes to implement the reservation policy, the government did face problems, for instance, the petitions from various castes which they received were to be considered for reservation. Thus, Dr. P. Radhakrishnan notes that inclusion in the list could have been on the basis of petitions by caste members or caste

associations, often, obsequious, recalling the benevolence of the alien rulers and reaffirming loyalty to them, these petitions dilated the petitioners 'glorious past' and deplored their 'gloomy present'. By thus trying to invoke sympathy, they prayed for inclusion in the list and for employment in government service and justified their prayers by referring to the concessions already granted to certain other communities.<sup>30</sup> The backward classes list thus grew for over a century from just 11 names in 1883 to 39 in 1893, 46 in 1903, 122 in 1913, 131 in 1923, 182 in 1933, 238 in 1943, 270 in 1953, 302 in 1963, and 323 in 1988.

### **Depressed Classes**

The next landmark was the birth of another category that of the depressed classes. The South Indian Depressed Classes Conference in 1917 passed a resolution requesting the government for separating the Panchamas from Backward classes in educational matters. Further, the Christian converts were denied their backward classes status and thereby the half-fee concession faced strong opposition. Following this, the government bifurcated the backward classes list into the depressed classes with 85 communities including the Panchamas and tribals and the castes other than the depressed classes, constituting 87 communities.

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30. P. Radhakrishnan, n.28, p.20.

## **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes**

The creation of the depressed classes category, preceded that of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. The first list was replaced by the scheduled caste list and the few groups which did not meet the requirement of untouchability for being in the list were shifted into the second list. In 1951, the second list was further split into two, the Scheduled Tribes and Backward Classes.

## **Most Backward Classes**

The first Backward Classes Commission of 1953, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission suggested that in the grant of educational concessions, the most backward classes of its classification should be given preference over the then backward classes. The Madras government felt that some of these communities were almost as backward as the scheduled castes but were not classified under the later for want of the untouchability status. Thereby the backward classes in 1957 were split into the backward classes and the most backward classes constituting 58 communities.

## **The Emergence of Reservation**

Similar to the term of backward class, the concept of reservation, long antedates the Indian Constitution. It was during the mid-nineteenth century, when the British

administration began its attempt to curb the Brahmin monopoly in public services, the concept of Reservation took shape.

In 1853, they discovered that the revenue establishment in Nellore district was controlled by 49 Brahmins, all from the same family. Because of their influence and family connections, the collector was powerless to detect their fraudulent activities, punish them and protect the public from their exploitation.<sup>31</sup>

The administration thus directed the collector to transfer such brahmin family clusters and the Board of Revenue (BOR) issued a Standing Order (BSO) to the Collectors, for them to prevent such monopoly. They were to have a proportion of tahsildars in every district. from castes other than Brahmins henceforth.

The BOR in 1904 obtained statements of caste of all employees from Collectors, which showed a proportion of Brahmins to non-Brahmins as 70 to 30. In 1911, the scrutiny of the revenue establishment revealed that in more than 10 out of 24 districts, the BSO was disregarded, the Brahmins argued that different sects ought to be treated as different

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31. P. Radhakrishnan, "Tamilnadu Backward Classes", **Bulletin, Madras Development Seminar Series, vol.xix, no.10** (Madras, 1989), p.503

castes. The proportion of Brahmins was excessive. The government again reiterated the departments to abide by the BSO. Ironically, it was mainly the Brahmins who supplied the administration with qualified persons.

The South Indian Liberal Federation grew out of the educated elite of the backward classes in 1916, who threw more light on the Brahmin monopoly. The non-brahmin movement also issued a manifesto contrasting the 3% Brahmin population in the Madras Presidency to their concentration in several public services. After the 1920 elections and the success of the justice party the Legislative Council was always involved in debates, questions and resolutions on the communal representation.

The government now, received half yearly reports on the caste of the employed, they sought to shift the Brahmins from Fort St. George to the Moffusils and recommended the government of India to accommodate them in central services. In 1924, they had appointed a Staff Selection Board to regulate appointments. The year 1925 saw the government, appointing a Committee to report on the working of the communal representation system.

More pressures from the backward classes forced the government to issue a Government Order (GO) by 1927 wherein, within a unit of twelve appointments, five was allocated to

the non brahmins - 41.7% - 2 each for brahmins, muslims, anglo Indians - 16.7%, and one to the depressed classes that is 8.3%. These were followed by repeated requests to be included in the backward classes list, the Vishwa brahmins wanted to be included into the depressed classes, and the Vanniyars for separate representation as a B.C. The Madras Provincial Backward Classes League, founded in 1934 acted as an umbrella organization of the various backward classes claiming for separate reservation.

In 1947, the government issued a G.O. slightly enlarging the unit, this allocated six - 42.9% - to the non brahmin Hindus (forward), two (14.3%) each to backward Hindus, brahmins, and Harijans (D.Cs) and one (7.1%) each to Anglo-Indians/Christians, and Muslims.

When the Constitution of India came into being, the government abrogated the Communal G.O., pointing out that it did not single out any particular section as a backward class and reserve for them a certain section of appointment, as provided in Article 16(4) of the Constitution, which runs thus:

Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the state, is



not adequately represented in the services under the state.<sup>32</sup>

A ruling of the Madras High Court in 1950 held that the G.O. was unconstitutional, this was later upheld by the supreme court, which provoked widespread protest. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker of Dravida Kazhagam also called for the Communal G.O. Day on August 14th of the same year, demanding an amendment suitable to the South. These protests, soon saw the government adding Article 15(4) with the first Amendment Act of 1951. Article 15(4) runs thus :

Nothing in this article or in Clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes<sup>33</sup>

Based on the above amendments was the reservation policy sketched by September 1951 restricting the reservation to scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and other backward classes. In a unit of twenty appointments in place of the earlier fourteen, this order allocated three (15%) to

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32. **The Constitution of India** (Allahabad, 1990), p.3.

33. *ibid.*, p.7.

the SCs and STs and five (25%) to the OBCs, leaving the rest for open competition by the entire population.<sup>34</sup>

In 1954, the government of India increased the reservation for SCs and STs from 16% corresponding to their population of 16.4%. The first Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1953 under the Chairmanship of Kaka Kalelkar which suggested as mentioned earlier the preference of those classified under the most backward section over the others in the other backward classes list. These MBCs were considered to be almost as backward as SCs but could not be classified under them for want of the untouchability status. Following this, the Madras government in February 1957 declared 58 communities in the OBCs list as most backward.

The states' Backward Classes Commission, the first Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission headed by A.N. Sattanathan submitted its report in 1970. It had observed that, in the late 1960s, just nine out of the numerous B.C.s accounting for only about 11% of the total B.C.s population had cornered most of the benefits made available to the entire B.C. lot. That is, 37% of the non-gazetted and 48% of the gazetted posts, 44% of the engineering and 47% of the medical college seats and 34% of the scholarship. To prevent this, it prescribed an income limit of Rs.9000/- on B.C.

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34. Radhakrishnan, n.31, p.505.

families for eligibility to B.C.s concessions. In 1971, the then ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) ministry enhanced the B.C. reservations from 25% to 31% (as against the recommended 33%) and the SCs/STs reservations to 18% (against the recommended continuation of the existing 16%). The following All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) ministry, enhanced the B.C. reservations from 31% to 50%.

The second backward classes Commission headed by J.A. Ambasankar, constituted in 1982 submitted its report in 1985, which was not tabled immediately for several political reasons. The Commission had included 20 communities belonging to 'forward class' in the B.Cs list. As many as seventeen, already in the B.C. list, had sought inclusion in the MBC list and atleast six, again already in the BCs list, while some others had sought inclusion in the STs list.<sup>35</sup>

It is in this political context should we study the Vanniyar caste movement which took several forms such as road-roko, rail-roko, harijan-Vanniya clash, ban of party flags in the northern districts, poll boycott and so on.

We have herein discussed 'who the Vanniyars are?' their origin, social, economic, demographic and political

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35.     ibid., p.511.

aspects. The basic agreements here are their claim for the Kshatriya status for which they raised mythological arguments, historical evidences and literary sources. The others being the proof of their caste thickly populating the four northern districts, the social distance principle used against them, their education, economic background and the political context i.e. the emergence of reservation in Tamil Nadu, which also justify their claim for 20% reservation and the Most Backward Classes status. These are the preliminary reasons which further led to several tensions.

We shall, now, before going into the details of the caste movement as such, discuss the crystallization of the Vanniyar caste identity in the subsequent chapter.

**C H A P T E R - I I I**

## **Crystallization of the Vanniyar Identity**

The preceding chapters dealt with several factors which culminated in the Vanniyar caste movement. This chapter analyses the process of crystallization of the most important factor, the **Caste Identity**.

The crystallization process, had several important landmarks, the first of its kind was the 1833 issue, when the Pallis or the Vanniyars, refused to accept the status of a humble agriculturist caste and procured a decree in Pondicherry. Further, 1871 saw them petitioning to the census superintendent claiming kshatriya classification in the forthcoming census. In the same year the "Jati Sangiraga Saaram" by Kunnam Munusamy Palli was published. He traced the Pallis to have descended from the fire race and inspired the erudities of the caste to form an Association.

### **The Caste Association**

These events now culminated into the formation of the Vanniyakula Kshatriya Maha Sangam founded by C. Annasamy Nayakar in 1888. The sangam had three primary objectives.

Firstly, the educational services. What was at stake were scholarships which might allow a village student to pay for a room at the hostel of a distant secondary institution,

fee concessions at institutions which still charged for tuition, and reservation of seats for Vanniyars in institutions of higher learning.

The second objective was, places in the civil services; these conferred status as well as job. The third was winning congress tickets (to fight elections) in lower governing boards as well as in the legislature and places in the cabinet.<sup>1</sup>

Caste Associations, as explained by Rudolph and Rudolph, have "its tendency to place group loyalties above merit and competence, and caste patriotism above the public interest, runs counter to both liberal and democratic values and jeopardizes the effectiveness of the government's vital functions. It is the caste associations which gave caste a new vitality and it is political democracy which has transformed caste and enabled it to play its paradoxical role in India today. Ironically, it is the caste association which links the mass electorate to the new democratic political processes and makes them comprehensible in traditional terms to a population still largely politically illiterate. Caste has been able to play this curious political role as bearer of both India's ancient

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1. Rudolph and S. Rudolph, "The Political Role of India's Caste Association", *Pacific Affairs*, xxxiii (March 1960), p.19.

regime and its democratic political revolution by reconstituting itself into the sabha, with characteristics of both the natural and voluntary association of caste defined in terms of both dharma and democracy."<sup>2</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph have vividly sketched the functions and dysfunctions of the caste associations with a democratic back drop. Subsequently, follows a more precise study of the several activities of the caste association which led to the crystallization of the caste identity.

These Caste Associations spread far and wide, mainly enforcing the sanskritised standard of social conduct. This process of sanskritisation will be analysed below. It was never the less one of the activities of the caste association. In 1904 this process of sanskritisation even appeared in the form of a document in the works. By 1931, the "Pallis" disappeared and only the "Vanniyakula kshatriyas" were returned in the census.

The Vanniyakula Kshatriya sangam of the North Arcot district held its 34th annual conference in 1953 and the South Arcot district held its tenth conference in 1954.<sup>3</sup> The Vanniyakula Kshatriya sangam has many important publications to its credit. The 1988 "Vanniyakula Villakam"

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2.       ibid, pp.11, 21-22.

3.       **The Hindu** (Madras) June 18 1953.



or a caste treatise by T.A. Nayakar, traces their lineage to the Kshatriyas, the "Varuna Darpana" or the "Mirror of Castes" by C. Arumoga Nayakar of 1901 traces their descent from the Pallava kings, the great rulers of South India. They also published a volume of Graduates and Diploma Holders among the Vanniyakula Kshatriyas in 1952 which stated that only 0.01% of the community were graduates and diploma holders.

The sangam had also published journals like the **Agnikula Adittan** - Agnikula's son - which begun circulation in 1908 and the **Vanniyakula Mithran**. The recent ones of the last decades were, **Kanal** and the daily **Thina Puratchi**, which is still in circulation.

The sangam had contributed a lot towards educational services for its members. There were seven schools established with three in Madras, a Technical school, an Orphanage and a secondary school. The sangam had also maintained rest houses at five pilgrimage centres.<sup>4</sup>

The sangam had also put forward economic demands, they urged for better irrigation facilities in the North

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4. I. Rudolph and S. Rudolph, **Modernity of Tradition - Political Development in India**, (Chicago 1967), pp.50-57.

Arcot district, electricity for agricultural purposes, better roads, expansion of the Krishna Pennar Multi-purpose water Project and relief to tenants during drought. The fact that many Vanniyars were tenants and labourers, ownership of the soil by the tillers was also demanded.<sup>5</sup>

The sangam also dabbled in politics especially from the 1952 elections. The details of their political developments follow in the subsequent chapter.

With the Caste Association factor, the Vanniyar identity had, no doubt, crystallized. We shall, now, analyse the functions of this association during the last decade particularly, since it proves a back drop for the collective mobilisation which bore fruit as the Vanniyar agitation of 1987-89 to acquire the Most Backward Classes status in the Tamil Nadu state reservation policy.

There were now several caste associations spread far and wide at the village, district and state levels. Dr. Ramdoss a Vanniyar by caste, a doctor by profession, hailing from the Thindivanam town, emerged a leader of the Vanniyar masses. This Thindivanam based leader invited around twenty seven existing caste associations in 1980 and finally crystallized a **Vanniyar Sangam**. Ramaswami Padaiyachi

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5.       ibid., p.51.

emerged as its President, V.S. Ramamurthy as its General Secretary and P.T. Elangoan as the President of the students' wing.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the Vanniyar Sangam, there are three other associations - the "**Vanniyakula Kshatriya Mahasangan**", the "**Vanniar Pervai**" and the "**Social Service Society**", popularly known as the "**Triple S**". The Vanniyar caste movement was equally divided between those seeking political gains by means of reservation for the community and those indulging in social service. "As an example of the first case on October 2nd 1982, 40,000 Vanniyars fasted for a day outside the collectorates offices all over Tamil Nadu to demand 20% reservation."<sup>7</sup>

In the second case, where social services received importance, these associations constitute a network of upwardly mobile and affluent individuals within the community. They constitute a Committee of elders who may be resorted to, for advice, assistance and advancement.

The Social Service Society or the Triple S as it is popularly known, proclaims its motto as "selflessness,

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6. **Junior Vikadan**, (Madras 1988), p.18.

7. Malcom Rodgers, **Kunaranagan Report**, (Madras, n.d.), p.26.

sincerity, service." Its aims and objectives listed in its constitution are as follows:

- (i) It shall render voluntary service to the needy;
- (ii) It shall help members in matters of education; cultural and social development and guide the members in entrepreneurship, employment, self-development etc.;
- (iii) It shall not have any political affiliation; and
- (iv) It shall strive for the social coherence and maintaining links of communication among members.<sup>8</sup>

The organisation of the "Triple S" comprises of four cells. The **Central Committee** delineates the scope of its activities. The four cells are:

1. **Simple Marriages Cell** is for the promotion of marriages costing less than Rs.500/-, "avoiding unnecessary and wasteful expenditure" and Matrimonial Guidance Cell;
2. **An Employment Guidance Cell** which includes a campaign for registration with employment exchange and 'pre interview guidance' i.e. coaching for self-presentation at job interviews;

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8. *ibid*, p.27.

3. **Self-Employment Guidance Cell** offers advice and financial assistance to those developing small scale business; and
4. **Health Care Cell** promotes the need for regular medical check ups, immunization and family planning guidance.<sup>9</sup>

This is to do with the social service wing of the Caste Associations.

Further, the Tindivanam based popular leader, Dr. Ramdoss, in 1988, amidst the Vanniyar agitation claiming the Most Backward Status in the state's reservation policy with 20% reservation in education and employment avenues, inaugurated the **Bombay Vanniyar Kshatriya Sangam**. There were about 20,000 Vanniyars in Bombay who were to extend their support to the agitation.<sup>10</sup>

The chapter has so far touched upon the basic aspects of the Vanniyar Caste Association, its origin, its activities, its functions, its organisation and its present dimensions. Now we shall pass on to a precise study of a very significant process of "Sanskritisation."

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9. *ibid.* p.26.

10. *Indian Express* (Madras), 17 August 1988.

## Sanskritisation

Sanskritisation, describes the process of cultural mobility in the traditional social structure of India. As, M.N. Srinivas defines, it refers to, a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, frequently, 'twice born' caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the dominant caste by the local community.<sup>11</sup>

The process of sanskritisation began to build with the back drop of the Vanniyars refusing to accept the status of agriculturist as labeled by the census officials. As mentioned above, as early as 1833 the pallis procured a decree in Pondicherry against this low caste labeling. They began tracing their lineage to that of the Kshatriyas and it is now that the vanniyars began imitating the brahminical style of living.

As . Francis writes in the gazetteer of the south Arcot district,

They are tending gradually to approach the

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11. M.N. Srinivas, **Social Change in Modern India**, (California 1966) p.6.

brahminical standard of social conduct discouraging adult marriage, meat-eating, and widow-remarriage and they also actively repress open immorality or other social sins which might serve to give the community a bad name. In 1904 a document came before one of the courts, which showed that, in the year previous, the representatives of the caste in 84 villages in this district had bound themselves in writing, under penalty or communication, to refrain (except with the consent of all parties) from the practices formerly in existence of marrying two wives and of allowing a woman to marry again during the lifetime of her first husband. Some of the caste have taken to calling themselves Vanniyakula Kshatriyas or Agnikala Kshatriyas and others even declare that they are Brahmins.<sup>12</sup>

In the Treatise of the Vanniyar caste, or the Vanniyakula Vilakkam, T.A. Nayakar, categorically denies that widow re-marriage was ever permitted.<sup>13</sup> To the contrary, Thurston in his "caste and Tribes in Southern India" gives graphic details about the ceremony of widow

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12. Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, **Castes and Tribes of Southern India**, vol.6, (Madras 1909) pp.12-13.

13. T. A. Nayakar, **A Treatise On the Vanniyar Caste** (Madras, 1988), p.68.

remarriage. According to details sketched out by the 1891 census, it is clear that their life styles ran contrary to those of the Brahmins. The census report reads, Vanniyars do not wear sacred threads. Some of them engage brahmins to officiate as their priests. Their girls are usually married after they attain maturity. The re-marriage of widows are permitted and actually practiced. Divorce is said to be permitted only in case of adultery by the wife. They are allowed to eat animal food and to drink spirituous liquours. They both burn and bury the dead. Their usual agnomen is Kavanda or Padaiyachi (soldier) but some of them who strive for a higher social standing call themselves Nayakar.<sup>14</sup>

This process of incorporating the brahminical mode of life by the low castes, did provoke criticisms from the census officials and from those belonging to other castes. For instance, as quoted in the 1901 census

This caste.....which claiming for themselves a position higher than that which Hindu society is inclined to accord to them. Their ancestors were undoubtedly socially superior to themselves, but they do not contend themselves with stating this, but in places are taking to wearing the sacred thread of the

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14. Government of India Census Report (Madras, 1891) part-I, p.101.



twice born and claim to be Kshatriyas. They have published pamphlets to prove their descent from that caste, and they returned themselves in thousands especially in Godavari, as Agnikula Kshatriyas or Vanniyakula Kshatriyas, meaning kshatriyas of the fire race. They have a widespread organisation, engineered from Madras, and in Godavari, riots have already occurred between them and the kapus, who do not admit their pretensions.<sup>15</sup>

Caste Associations had their own role to play at this juncture. They turn to the census office for, the listing of caste and caste description was an important factor because of the official imprint, Taking innumerable caste petitions regarding the listing and description, J. Charters Moloney thus remarks, "The last few years and especially the occasion of the present census, have witnessed an awakening of the caste spirit in certain aspects. For numerous caste sabhas have emerged each keep to assert the dignity of the social group which it represents."<sup>16</sup>

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15. Government of India Census Report (Madras, 1901) part-I, p.171.

16. Government of India Census Report (Madras, 1911) Part-I, p.178.

The Vanniyakula kshatriya sangam had also petitioned to G.T. Boag Esquire, the then superintendent of census operations Madras in 1928, to be listed as Kshatriyas and the officer in lieu of their petition, described them as how most of the caste men, described themselves.<sup>17</sup> Thus by the 1931 census, either Agnikula kshatriyas or Vannikula kshatriya was returned leaving aside other old names, such as the Pallis. Thus, T.A. Nayakar in his "Vanniyakula Villakam" or A Treatise on the Vanniyar caste states that, "it took fifty years to make the census authorities to recognise the Vanniyars as Kshatriyas."<sup>18</sup>

The process of crystallization of the caste identity ran parallel to all these issues as these fellow castemen began to work together. If it were the masses or, if it were the government officials they had to tackle, the togetherness factor worked out the "Caste Identity".

A parallel occurrence of sanskritisation has been recorded by Robert L. Hardgrave in his "The Nadars of Tamil Nad and The Political Culture of a Community in Change". In this case, with their increasing wealth, the gap between their economic status and their traditional position in the

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17. Nayakar, n.13, p.xi.

18. ibid, p.x.

hierarchy of ritual purity, the Nadars sought to bring their social status to a level commensurate with their economic power by imitating the brahminical customs.

They claimed for the kshatriya status by 1860s. It is from here that their sanskritisation process began. They imitated the dress and the jewellery pattern of the brahmins, forbade widow remarriage and permitted widows to dress only in white, they declared water be carried across the hips like the brahmins and not on their heads. They even began the practice of cremation and the system of dowry unlike their earlier bride price. Vegetarianism came into vogue, named their children after sanskrit gods. The most important issue was that, as a symbol of status, they began to practice the wearing of the sacred thread which was an exclusive practice of the twice born Dwijas.<sup>19</sup> When all this saw them through, their temple entry was rejected to by the other castes.

This issue of temple entry of the Nadars was taken to the courts. The courts had to consider the recognised local custom. The nadars were found in the category of those denied entrance into a Hindu temple. Thus their

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19. Robert L. Hardgrave, **The Nadars of Tamil Nad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change** (California, 1969), p.42.

sanskritisation failed miserably due to unacceptance of other caste members.<sup>20</sup> It could be contextual to recollect the riots by kapus in Godavari against the Vanniyars wearing the sacred thread.

It now remained for them to use their resources of wealth and power in a united effort to raise the entire community to a politically influential position. There again, the instrument of social and political mobilisation was the caste association, the **Nadar Mahajana Sangam** like the Vanniyakula Kshatriya sangam. Same, was the case with the sanskritisation process. The Vanniyars in the later days began to reject sanskritisation and made no more attempts to go up the caste hierarchy on the one hand having achieved the official kshatriya status and for the achievement of material benefits through initially backward class privileges and more recently the most backward class privileges.

To wind up the discussion on the process of sanskritisation, we shall now, throw light on the subsequent process. To start with, Yogendra Singh argues that the earlier aspiration for vertical mobility or sanskritisation among the lower castes has now been replaced by a new

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20.     ibid., p.47.

feeling of self-identity with a one's own caste or increased horizontal caste solidarity. Caste associations are an indirect reflection of this new trend.<sup>21</sup>

The early nineteenth century saw the lower castes sankritising and as a post independence phenomena emphasis was on the "horizontal phenomena or identity consciousness", and not on the vertical mobility. This was referred to by Yogendra Singh as the "changing sources of honour and power."<sup>22</sup>

Earlier, power was accessible only by going up the ladder of ritual social status. In the post independence period this traditional caste based superiority of the brahmins and kshatriyas were fast dying out. This superiority feature, was being replaced by democratic trends. At the ritual level, brahmins are still required to perform the ritual but in the political and economic sphere the principle of egalitarianism has crept in with a simultaneous rejection of the hierarchical principle of traditional caste.

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21. Yogendra Singh, **Modernisation of Indian Tradition** (New Delhi, 1986), p.171.

22. *ibid.*, p.171.

In this chapter, the crystallization of the Vanniyar caste identity, which is one of the most significant issues of our study was discussed. The succeeding chapter discusses the various stages of the caste movement.

**C H A P T E R - I V**

## **Collective Mobilization and the Politicisation Process**

As we have discussed the social background of the Vanniyars and the crystallization of their caste identity, we now pass on to the central issue of collective mobilization and the politicisation process. Though these processes began with the earlier phases of sanskritisation and De-sanskritization, we shall now focus on the agitation which is the central issue of our study. To start with, we shall discuss the politicisation process and gradually build the context for the collective mobilization process.

### **The Politicisation process**

The process of politicisation could be classified for convenience as the early phase, the middle phase and the recent phase. Analysing the early phase, we shall begin with the Vanniyar Conference of 1936. convened in North Arcot, where the Maharaja of Pithapuram claimed that the Vanniyars should capture twelve seats of the new provincial legislature to form an effective minority party to press its demands. The 1937 elections were promptly conducted but the Vanniyars won only two seats.<sup>1</sup>

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1. David Arnold, **Congress in Tamilnad 1919-87** (New Delhi 1977) p.155-56.



The following 1937 Thiruvannamalai conference of the Vanniyakula Kshtriyas was held under the presidentship of M.A.Manickavelu Naicker who brought to light their political and economic backwardness. He also made clear that the Adi Dravidas were better off than themselves though representing an ancient royal family. The Thinnanur conference of the same year passed a resolution condemning the action of the Congress and Justice parties for not having given due representation to the Vanniyars in the district who, according to the sangam constituted 25% of the districts population. Further, they requested the government for separate reservations and appointment of a committee of members.<sup>2</sup>

The 1945 Indian Parliament Election had no Vanniyar candidates though there were seven selected from Tamil Nadu. The I. Prakasam Ministry included thirteen ministers but did not have a single Vanniyar. The Vanniyars were also said to be involved in the country's freedom struggle, they included Kathavarayan Chandavarayan, Thillai Valliammai, and Mayuram Naga Padaiyachi, who lost his life in an encounter, trying to protect Gandhiji. - . Others were Anjalai Ammaiyar, Janagi Thiruvengadam Govindaswamy, Devagi Ammaiyar,

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2. **The Hindu** (Madras) 7 January 1937. All references to **The Hindu** in this Chapter are to the Madras edition of that newspaper.

Adikesavalu Naicker, Salem O. Subramaniam, S.K. Govinda Raja Naicker, Rajarisi and Artha Naseen Varma.

The 1947 district board election marked the beginning of the middle phase which synchronized with the post independence period. When the second world war was over, the Vanniyars pressed the Congress state ministry, that the appointments to civil services ought to reflect the Vanniyars population percentage and also that the Congress should assure the election of Vanniyars on a population basis to all the elected bodies, such as, the municipal corporations, district boards and state legislatures. Though the demand was not unconstitutional under the special considerations meted to the scheduled castes and backward classes in public services and educational institutions, the Congress did not respond favourably. Thus the Vanniyars decided to contest independently.

Their electoral efforts sprang from the District Board elections. The subjects under their jurisdiction such as education, medical facilities, road building, were all of great local interest. They captured 22 out of the existing 52 seats in the South Arcot district board. This being their first step, they next faced the state elections.

The 1951 state wide conference of Vanniyakula Kshatriya Sangam decided to face the state elections with the Tamil

Nadu Toilers party, the high figures of which were, N.A.Manikavelu Naiker, a lawyer and S.S. Ramaswami Padaiyachi, a young chairman of Cuddalore Municipal Council. They formed a state level Central Election Committee with Padaiyachi as its chairman to supervise Vanniyar candidate selection. Alongside, District Election Committees were also formed.

While the stage was thus set with an effective organisation, traditional loyalties rocked the state wide organisation and hence led to a split. The caste sabhas of North Arcot and South Arcot failed to agree and formed rival organisations. The Tamil Nadu Toilers Party emerged strong under Padaiyachi, while in North Arcot and Chengleput, the Vanniyars grew under Naicker which formed the Commonweal party.

These caste sabhas-cum-parties utilized the already established village social organisation to mobilise their caste members. Their mobilisation proved effective in spite of illiteracy and absence of mass media because they could translate electoral issues at the grass root level into meaningful terms. That apart, the candidate and other local leaders shared a common caste, culture, interest and were linked by social contacts which made their campaigning easy.

While the Commonweal party representing the older caste sabha of North Arcot and Chingleput captured six seats, the Tamil Nadu Toiler's party representing South Arcot captured 19 seats in the Legislative Assembly, out of the existing 190 thus representing 13% as against their strength of 10% out of the total Tamil Nadu population.

The congress did not win a majority in the 1952 elections in the Madras state legislature. Thus they talked six Commonweal party members into support, though they did not succeed in convincing them to join the party. In exchange for their support, Naicker was given a seat in the Congress. The Tamil Nadu toilers party remained as an opposition only.

When the congress chief minister, C. Rajagopalachari - a brahmin by caste - resigned in 1954, Kamaraj Nadar succeeded him. The Tamil Nadu Toilers party now supported the Kamaraj led congress ministry and Padaiyachi joined the cabinet explaining their earlier opposition stand with the non-brahmin issue.

Now, the Vanniyars had two ministers of the existing eight to boast about. Cordial relations existed between the vanniyars and the congressmen, thus the two vanniyar based parties were dissolved. The official proceedings with the recognition of the Election Commission was done in 1956.

But even after dissolution, the sangam continued its earlier demands for representation.

The Vanniyakula Kshatriya Sangam had three main objectives, as mentioned in the preceding chapter, that of education services, representation in civil services and winning congress tickets i.e. nomination for seats in lower governing boards, legislature and cabinet. They could now hope for governmental aid and support, because of officially being classified as a backward class - just above the untouchables.

All through, several local branches of the vanniyakula Kshatriya sangam sprouted in local taluks and towns. The thirty fourth North Arcot district Vanniyakula Kshatriya Sangam conference passed resolutions requesting the government to provide better irrigation facilities to the agriculturists in the North Arcot district and to provide electricity for agricultural purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The South Arcot district Vanniyakula Kshatriya Sangam held its tenth conference in 1954.<sup>4</sup> The year's District Board election too followed. Now, being in good terms with

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3. **The Hindu**, 18 June 1953.

4. Rudolph, L. and Rudolph, S.H., **The Modernity of Tradition - Political Development in India** (Chicago, 1967) p.52.

the vanniyaars, the Congress promised to support them. Unexpectedly, more number of Reddiar candidates were elected and hence a Reddiar was elected as the chairman of the District Board. This rubbed the Vanniyaars on the wrong side.

Kamaraj Nadar who assumed office in 1954 was followed by Bhakthavatchalam to Chief Ministership, His ministry had a vanniyaar in the cabinet, so was the case in C.N. Annadurai's ministry (who was the immediate successor). This phase in the political history of Tamil Nadu saw the dormancy of the vanniyaars. In spite of the presence of the Caste Associations, it appeared to have only a marginal influence on the political conduct of the Vanniyaars. As Washbrook describes, in his essay, "in the 1962 legislative council elections the Padaiyachi caste association candidates were all beaten although, they stood in a district in which their caste had a large number of voters. The one successful Padaiyachi candidate who was successful had nothing to do with the association. He was backed by magnates of various castes and stood on the congress swarajya party ticket."<sup>5</sup> This period of dormancy existed for nearly two decades.

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5. David Washbrook, "Development of Caste Organization in South India", in Baker, ed., **South India: Political Institutions and Political Change** (Delhi, 1975) p.150.

Karunanidhis' Ministry in 1969 had only one Vanniyar and in 1971 had two Ministers from this caste.

In 1971, the A.N. Sattanathan Commission - Tamil Nadu's first Backward Classes Commission - submitted its report. The then ruling Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) ministry enhanced the Backward Classes - B.C. reservations from 25% to 31% (as against the recommended continuation of the existing 16%). The following All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) ministry enhanced the B.C. reservations from 31% to 50%. These latter day parties of DMK and AIADMK under . Karunanidhi and . M.G. Ramachandran, respectively, attracted major chunks of the Vanniyar crowd. Their representation in the Council of Ministers remained barely one. In 1984 the Vanniyar Peravai agitated and subsequently the M.G. Ramachandran ministry included one more . Vijayalakshmi Palaniswamy who was immediately removed in a reshuffle.

The recent phase of the politicisation process includes the formation of the recent Caste Association - the Vanniyar Sangam - out of the already existing ones which lay scattered. The early phase of collective mobilisation also has been discussed subsequently.

One of the greatest hall marks of this phase is the self-styled leader Dr. Ramdoss's creation of the Vanniyar

Sangam in 1980. He invited the then existing 27 sangams and held a meeting out of which emerged the Vanniyar Sangam.<sup>6</sup> In 1982 emerged the Vanniyar Peravai.<sup>7</sup> The Vanniyars also evolved a symbol for themselves.

### **The Vanniyar Symbol**

The Vanniyar symbol was a yellow flag with a flaming pot - the thichatti - or this pot with fire is supposed to symbolically represent the fact that they are the descents of a fire race called Agnikula Kshatriyas. It should also be recollected here that the word Vahni means fire in Sanskrit. T.A. Nayakar in his writing - Vanniyakula Vilakkam or A Treatise on the Vanniyar Caste mentions that the fire pot which is taken in a procession on a fixed day during the occasion of the annual festivities of Draupadai and other Goddesses is borne on the head of a Vanniyar. The privilege of treading on the fire is also peculiar to the Vanniyars. Such is the characteristic of the Vanniyar symbol.

The ideology of the Vanniyar sangam, was to fight for the rights of the Backward Classes in general. Their demands are fourfold,

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6. Junior Vikadan (Madras) 30 September 1987 p.17.

7. The Hindu, 27 November 1988.



- (i) educational and employment reservation formulated on a caste based population record which is to be surveyed immediately;
- (ii) according to the above, reservation of 2% in central services and 20% in state services;
- (iii) implementation of the Mandal Commission Report; and
- (iv) in accordance with the Mandal Commission Report, the Scheduled castes reservation ought to be increased from 18 to 22%.<sup>8</sup>

The Vanniyars have put forward these demands of separate reservations in the state and central services for several reasons. There are several immediate economic and social reasons for such demands which will be subsequently dealt with.

### **Relative Deprivation**

They demanded a separate reservation section, because "the present reservation policy favoured the 'forward' among the backward, their children had to compete with the students of developed districts like Trichy, Coimbatore, Madura and of course Madras. In the present policy, most of the seats, it is said, are to be cornered by the rich in the

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8. Dr. Ramdoss, **Engal Porattan Etharkaaka?** (Why do we struggle?) (Trichy 1988) pp.1-2.

backward community. They do not have money power and therefore exclusive reservation is the only solution they assert."<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Ramdoss too emphasised on the above, "Since, only a few castes in the backward classes list have been availing the opportunity of the reservation, even a hike in the reservation percentage of 50% to 75% would lead the Vanniyars to nowhere therefore the demand is for separate 20% reservation."<sup>10</sup>

The Vanniyars who dominated northern districts of Tamil Nadu, had very limited educational facilities unlike the other nearby districts. The Vellalars who belong to the forward caste still practiced the purity-pollution belief and kept away from the Vanniyars.

As mentioned earlier, the Vanniyars always felt that a particular forward portion of the Backward Classes always walked away with the major chunk of the reservation. In comparison to the scheduled castes, the Vanniyars were caustic about the privileges the former were being offered

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9. **Indian Express** (Madras) 1 July 1988. All references to **Indian Express** in this chapter are to the Madras edition of that newspaper.

10. Dr. Ramdoss, n.8, p.7.

by the government. Such being the relative deprivation felt by the Vanniyars, the social reasons which include the economic condition, the educational facilities, the purity-pollution aspect have been discussed subsequently.

### **Social Reasons**

The immediate economic reason for the demands of separate reservation is poverty. The Vanniyars are mainly small land or farm workers. Most of them lead a hand to mouth existence and to top it all, they were invariably in the clutches of money-lenders who managed to keep them going in their state of permanent indebtedness and finally usurp their lands.

The agricultural labourers were paid in accordance to the Minimum Wages Act, they receive very low wages and the labour available is far in excess to that required thus the labour is shared by everyone because every one needs employment."<sup>11</sup> While such being their economic conditions, a couple of districts like Salem and Dharmapuri - both Vanniyar dominated districts - were infested with naxalite activities.

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11. **Indian Express**, 1 August 1988.

In such districts, the landless workers struggle for their livelihood for several months in a year. Here agriculture depends on monsoon and is a predominantly drought prone area. This immediately forms the requisite conditions for a naxalite prone area.

The stretch from Tirupattur to Nayakankottai in Dharmapuri district was chosen by Naxalites to mobilize their cadres. And they were successful. At least 20 villages in this stretch have been identified as Naxalite infested villages.<sup>12</sup> The Vanniyar youth in the villages seem to be holding the government responsible for their present economic condition.

For instance, one of them charged that "while the government has successfully eliminated Naxalites in Dharmapuri and North Arcot districts, it has not done anything to ameliorate the conditions of the poor."<sup>13</sup> While their economic conditions were thus coloured, the social conditions were no better.

The Vanniyar dominated areas have meagre educational facilities. Dharmapuri has only two government arts colleges. People have accused the government for ignoring

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12. Indian Express, 1 July 1988.

13. ibid.

the district because it is dominated by the Vanniyars. They compare their district with that of the newly formed Periyar district facilitated with an autonomous Engineering College. Some of the private colleges managed by members of other communities prefer their own candidates. There is only one college at Paramathy Velur started by their community which is hardly sufficient.

Emphasizing on the social distance aspect Dr. Ramdoss points out, "the Vellalas still practice the purity-pollution belief which was one of the traditional norms of the caste system. The Vellalars do not eat food cooked in a Padaiyachis house."<sup>14</sup> These formed the more immediate reasons for the Vanniyar caste movement. Two essential features of a caste movement being leadership and ideology, are subsequently highlighted.

### **Leadership and Ideology**

Leadership is no longer a bequeathed crown, but in today's democratic world, it demands essential qualifications of articulating, efficiently representing the association and democratic cognizance. After the squabbles within the party, Dr. Ramdoss a Doctor by profession and

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14. Dr. Ramdoss, n.8 p.11.

native of Thindivanam emerged the supremo. With time he emerged a cult figure, arriving in a convoy of not less than twenty five cars declaring his disinterest in political power, he addressed the villagers very affectionately, "*En Anbu Sonthangale*" (my dear relatives) and swayed them through his fiery speech. Such being the style of leadership, the Vanniyar Ideology was to fight for the backward classes in general and based on this was built their fourfold objectives.

### **Collective Mobilization**

The Vanniyars were mobilised to different degrees at different stages, yet the collective mobilisation was highlighted during their recent agitation. For the Vanniyar demand to be fulfilled, it did require the mobilisation of the masses. When the Vanniyar leaders were busy mobilising and hitting the headlines of the local dailies, there arose another train of incidents. The Vanniyar demand succeeded to have opened a pandoras box. The demands from other castes and backward classes came to the fore front.

### **Demands from other castes**

The Federation of Vellala Associations demanded a 35% and 5% reservation in the state, and central services respectively, Thuluva Vellalar Sangam for 30% and 3%, Kongu

Vellala Gounder Peravai for 25% and 2.5% for Kongu Vellala Gounders, the Vysya Mahasabha for 10% and 1% for Arya Vysyas, Kamma Mahajana sangam for 15%, Reddy Welfare Association for an appropriate percentage of the existing twenty four Reddy subsects, Thevar Peravai for 30% alongwith S.T. Status for the Thevars, Agamudayar - Kallar - Marawar Combine for 25% for the Mutharayars, the Nadar Mahajana Sangam 20% (along with S.C. benefits) for the Nadars, and the Yadava Mahasabha for 10% for the Yadavas, senai Thalaivars demanded to be included in the Most Backward Classes - MBC list, inclusion of Dalit Christians in the scheduled caste list, Ambedkar Makkal Iyakkam has demanded doubling the present 18% reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.<sup>15</sup>

The Tamil Nadu Brahmins Association were initially clamouring for a 20% reservation for all forward classes in the 32% open quota to fight the incursions by those meritorious B.C. students in college admissions.<sup>16</sup> The Brahmins demanded to limit the total reservations in the state to 50% and declaring the rest as 'merit quota'

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15. P. Radhakrishnan, "Tamilnadu Backward Classes", **MIDS Bulletin** (Madras, 1989) p.509.

16. **Indian Express**, 24 September 1987.

exclusively for those not covered by the reservation scheme.<sup>17</sup>

The Vanniyar Sangam followed a couple of methods in the process of collective mobilisation. They mobilised the masses mostly in rural areas who were politically illiterate, economically and socially downtrodden. The most popular were the street plays, conferences and village get-togethers, where Dr. Ramdoss who had almost become a cult figure addressed the onlooking masses very affectionately and swayed them through his fiery speech gradually developed in the process. Dr. Ramdoss addressed the crowds gathered at public meetings as "*En Anbu Sonthangale*" (my dear relatives), very much in line with . . . M.G. Ramachandran's *Rathathin Rathamana Vdanpirappugale* (my dear blood relatives) and . . . Karunanidhi's *Vyirinum Melana Udanpirapugale* (my dearest kith and kin).

The street play or as it is locally called the "*Therukoothu*" was a periodic happening in which the themes related to the glorious past of the Vanniyars and the mythological arguments of their descent. Dr. Ramdoss, the leader who attended a handful of such street plays, hit out at the dominant castes saying that the Vanniyars used to

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17. P. Radhakrishnan, n.15, p.510.



play lead roles earlier. But when other sophisticated media like the drama and cinema developed, the dominant castes have captured their fields of arts.

Secondly, the several meetings and conferences at the village and district levels was an important method for collective mobilisation. As Dr. Ramdoss claimed during a press interview, "for the last eight years our sangam organised 25 district conferences and 5000 public meetings."<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, the village get-togethers were organised to explain the reasons for their actions and giving the villagers : guidelines about how to be an asset to the Association. The above two methods were supplemented with volatile speeches aimed at linking the question of reservation to day to day affairs. They spoke about democracy in a layman's language and got across their point on reservations. They did not, in this context, fail to rake up their royal descent from the fire race and contrast to their present paltry conditions. By so handling the masses they succeeded in collectively mobilizing them. This mobilization led them to a fierce agitation. Apart from these methods used by

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18. The Hindu, 27 November 1988.

the sangam there is yet another novelty, i.e. the organisation.

The organisation of the sangam took shape very effectively. The important decision making boards were the **general council, the administrative council and the working committee.** They also had district level organisers and almost every village had a unit. They were also ready to form an on the spot unit to form a specific squad. For instance, the volunteer force or the *thondar padai* was organised on the basis of self-defence, the south Arcot district had organised a *Raja Naga Padai* or the *King Cobra Force* as its volunteer force and so on. On the eve of the poll boycott session they had also come up with the suicide squads to make the boycott a success. Dr. Ramdoss had informed the press correspondents, that the sangam had as many as 10,000 units in the state and about 35 lakh members. Such being the organisational efficacy, they manned a well planned agitation which could possibly be discussed at three different stages.

The first stage of the agitation was rather a mild one. From 1980, the Vanniyar sangam had organised twenty five district conferences and over 5000 public meetings. They had cabled innumerable times to the then Chief Minister, .. M.G. Ramachandran pleading for a meeting to

explain their problems. When the Vanniyars had their own caste men, like Panrotti Ramachandran in a senior level portfolio of the M.G. Ramachandran Ministry, they did not succeed in meeting the Chief Minister. There were about 35 Vanniyar, Members of Legislative Assembly representing various political parties, yet, nothing worked. Dr. Ramdoss claimed to have written around twenty five letters to M.G. Ramachandran and about fifteen to Rajiv Gandhi and received no reply. Thus, they went ahead with processions and demonstrations and organised a one day road block in 1986, and even stopped trains. All these measures evoked no response from the government. Now, the Sangam was forced to change its style from the mild to the violent means.

The second stage of the agitation was the one week road roko in September between 17th and 23rd of 1987, alongside was the Harijan-Vanniyar clash. As the Vanniyar leader, Dr. Ramdoss says they were left with no other means than taking this extreme step of paralysing traffic. Thus, the Vanniyars blocked traffic both road and rail, burnt public transport buses and stepped up violence and even called for bandh. The situation was very tense that the Harijans were attacked and was followed by retaliatory attacks.

When, the Vanniyars were condemned for their violent means, Dr. Ramdoss justified their action. "The community

constitutes more than one third of the states population. There were thirty five MLAs in the last Assembly representing all political parties. Did they think of the community at any time? We don't get even one percent of the jobs while forward castes have been cornering all the benefits. Let the government take a census now, for that will clear all doubts about the grossly exaggerated claims of the numerical strength of each and every community. The question of sharing the cake could then be easily settled to everyone's satisfaction."<sup>19</sup> This being their position according to the picture they paint, we shall now discuss in detail, the Harijan-Vanniyar clash.

#### **The Harijan-Vanniyar Clash**

The Harijans and Vanniyars are socially and economically backward and the Vanniyars were only a strata above the Harijans. So, why was there a chance for a clash of such violent measures? Each of them, had their own reasons. While Harijans say, they were the worst affected during the one week road roko agitation, and in the process of challenging the Vanniyar might, they claim to have lost 6000 huts which went up in flames. They also explain that the Vanniyars were frustrated on seeing the Harijans

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19. **The Hindu**, 27 November 1988.

enjoying governmental concessions like bank loans, grant of pattas etc... and of course not to mention their privilege of 18% reservation in employment and education.

The harijans have also reported to touring press persons about the crude untouchability practiced by the Vanniyars. A fifty year old Harijan woman had this to say, "Vanniyars resent it when they see our women neatly dressed, they pass unsavory remarks. Our men found wearing footwear were taken to task when they happened to pass through Vanniyar streets."<sup>20</sup>

The Vanniyars have their version to every single issue. They always complained of police harassment, and the police partiality toward the Harijans. While a Vanniyar reports, "they dare not touch a Harijan this soft attitude has emboldened them to attack us and set fire to our houses."<sup>21</sup>

Labour has always been a bone of contention between the Vanniyars and Harijans. While the Vanniyars demanded for higher wages, the harijans were willing to work for the existing rate of wages, thus, they snatched a major chunk of the existing employment and the Vanniyars were pushed away.

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20. The Hindu, 27 November 1988.

21. ibid.

This has always been the reason for the age old tensions and frequent clashes between the two communities. Thus, during the week long agitation of Vanniyars, about 5000 huts of Vanniyars were burnt to ashes. These were mostly retaliatory acts.

If the villages were dotted with the yellow Vanniyar flags, so were they with blue flags of the Ambedkar Association and other Harijan movements too. The prominent Harijan leader L. Elayaperumal formed the Scheduled Castes Liberation Movement (SCALM) by merging his Manitha Urimai Paadhukappu Iyakam or HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION MOVEMENT with another Harijan movement Ambedkar Iyakkam led by Mr. Sakthidasan.

As this fervour continued, once again if the Vanniyar sangam organised a Thondar Padai or the Volunteer force, so did the Harijans forming their Neela Padai or Blue Force to protect their men from communal violence. If the Vanniyars strove for a Vanniyar government, so did the Harijans. Thus ran amuck the clashes inspite of the leaders belonging to the two groups signing a Joint Action Plan to maintain peace and amity.

The next important landmark in the second stage of the agitation was the militancy of the youth and the tense

situation. They claim to sacrifice their lives to achieve their demands. Stage two was the most tense. That, even a year later no politician was allowed to tour the Vanniyar dominated districts for instance . . . G.K. Moopasar the then Tamil Nadu Congress Committee TNCC-I President, was the only one who toured, with tight security. A year later, they celebrated September 17th as martyr's day erecting pillars costing about Rs.67000/- at Pappanapet, Panayapuram, Kolyaanur, Chithani and Kollukarankuttai to mourn the death of Vanniyars during police firing.

The third stage was marked by the poll boycott stir of the Vanniyars, the November 30th deadline and the birth of the caste based party. The Tamil Nadu state assembly was due to have its election. The Vanniyars, were determined not to participate, also banned all political parties flags from being hoisted in their districts and also to prevent elections being held in the Vanniyar dominated areas.

The poll boycott was made a success with the working out of the several district public meetings, the *therdhal purakatippu Vilakka Podukootangal* - election boycott propaganda meeting - and also numerous village get-togethers. In the district-wise public meetings, the Vanniyar sangam leader, Dr. Ramdoss, swayed the masses with his speech quoting one such, "All successive governments

have cheated us. It required eight full years for our sangam to just meet the chief minister and present our demands. We have lost faith in all political parties. Hence the poll boycott. I'd appeal to our 'Sonthangal' - Relatives - especially 'Thaaymargal' - women folk - to beware of the political 'dogs' that might enter your village for votes. Don't allow these dogs to divide our clan. Give them a sound thrashing and drive them away."<sup>22</sup>

During the numerous village get togethers organised, the villagers were explained in simple terms about the poll boycott and were given reasons and related to grassroots level problems to understand and grasp the pulse of the situation. The leaders here used every opportunity to remind the simple villagers of their royal lineage contrasting it to their present day meagre life. This, they emphasise is due to injustice through the existing reservation system.

All these led to several issues such as the determination of the Vanniyar youth. Quoting one of them, "we have waited for forty long years, we will not wait any more. We will see to it that no elections are held in our villages. All politicians including those from our

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22. Indian Express, 10 September 1988.



community have betrayed us. We will sacrifice our lives to achieve our demands. If we don't achieve them now, let at least the future generation enjoy the fruits of our sacrifice."<sup>23</sup> This apart, several slogans have come about in the villages like "*Beware of political dogs that may seek your votes. Thrash them... drive them away.*"

In a village near Villupuram, a graffiti reads, "*We will certainly now allow the elections to be held.*" Village entrances were marked with bill boards, like the one, at the entrance to Sadayandikuppam in Kandamangalam constituency, where there is a board with the Vanniyarsangam's yellow flag with a fire pot with the sangam's welcome alongside is a billboard which reads .. "*No entry to Political Dogs*".

By the act of poll boycott, the sangam has succeeded in knitting together their fellow castemen, expressing their plight through the press and quoting Dr. Ramdoss in an interview to press correspondents

"By voting in the past elections we have not achieved anything. What are we going to lose by boycotting the poll this time? By giving the boycott call we have united our community into a well knit one. It helped focus our plight

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23. **Indian Express**, 1 July 1988.

through the press. The continued neglect of successive regimes compelled us to think in terms of boycotting the poll. It will be voluntary and no one will be prevented from going to the polling booth.<sup>24</sup>

Further, the November 30th 1988 deadline, which the sangam echoed time and again was to evoke a favourable response before the said date. The Vanniyars claimed that they presented their grievances to the governor three months ago and are still awaiting a response. They were only informed that it was forwarded to the Prime Minister. In his interview with press persons, it is reported that Dr. Ramdoss said "we are unable to understand the delaying tactics. What is required is only a government order. It does not have any financial implication."<sup>25</sup> The Vanniyar sangam, now threatened for, another agitation which they claimed would certainly affect those hindering their achievements.

The Vanniyars' main grievance which they further reiterated was that the reservations were given in a purely unscientific manner to the backward classes. "The upper classes included in the backward classes list are currently

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24. Ibid., n.19.

25. ibid.

grabbing the reservation quota leaving particularly nothing for us. We are worse off than scheduled castes. After all we are demanding 20% reservation for the Vanniyars from out of the 50% reserved for the other backward classes. Our community constitutes one third of the state's population and yet we don't get even one percent benefits. We suggest compartmentalisation of all backward classes into some compact groups and grant of concessions on the basis of their respective population strength."<sup>26</sup>

The Dravida Munetra Kazkgam - DMK - under the leadership of Karunanidhi promised a caste based census and that it would consider the question of providing exclusive reservation to certain "most backward" communities if it was voted back to power. The DMK was declared their first enemy by the Sangam. The activists point out that it was under the leadership of Karunanidhi that the DMK ministry scrapped the already existing 'most backward classes' section in the states reservation policy.

In response to the pressures of Vanniyars and keeping in mind the coming elections, the government came up with its acceptance of separate reservations for certain backward classes and postponement of its enforcement to the findings

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26.     ibid.

of a survey on the backward classes population and backwardness. This was a nine month survey to be conducted by a special officer, P.V. Venkatakrishnan, Special Commissioner and Commission for Land Reforms. The excerpts of the press release by the Tamil Nadu government follows:

1. At present, there is a reservation of 18 per cent for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Government educational institutions and government jobs in Tamil Nadu. The reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is mandatory under the Constitution and based on considerations of social justice. This reservation shall continue as before. There is thus no conflict of interest between the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on the one hand and any other section of the people on the other.
2. There is a reservation of 50 per cent for the Backward Classes. This reservation is just and fair and it is proposed to maintain it at the same level.
3. It may be recalled that during the tenure of Thiru Kamaraj as Chief Minister, 58 communities were categorized as "Most backward" and recognised for the purpose of educational concessions. This list of 58 was revised in 1972 to 39 after removing redundancies and electing certain communities which were no longer found in Tamil Nadu. The Vanniyar community is on

this list. However, while these 39 communities continue to be eligible for certain concessions regarding educational fees and scholarships, they remained part of the larger list of Backward Classes for purposes of reservation in educational institutions and Public Services. This larger list was expanded by successive state governments since 1972 and now stands at 202.

4. The government, after careful consideration of the situation, accepts in principle that within the overall limit of 50 per cent reservation for Backward Classes there should be separate reservation for certain groups of communities among the Backward Classes including those communities considered to be most backward. The Vanniyar Community will get the benefit of this separate reservation applicable to the most backward group of communities as also the others included in the 39 mentioned in paragraph 3.
5. It may also be noted that 68 (sixty eight) communities which have been listed as Denotified Communities and are socially, educationally and economically backward, now form part of the larger list of backward Classes. They have also been enjoying some additional concessions such as special schools, housing, irrigation wells, etc. While

retaining these additional concessions these communities also deserve to be sub-categorized for purposes of separate reservation in educational institutions and public services.

6. The government has received representations from many more communities claiming Most Backward Status. However, the government is not in a position to accept straightway the claims made by different communities regarding their respective numerical strength and relative levels of backwardness. Therefore, the government proposes to conduct a comprehensive survey to get more reliable and accurate data on the number of people belonging to different communities which are included in the current list of 202 Backward Classes and on their respective levels of backwardness. This survey will be conducted by a Special Officer appointed for the purpose with the assistance of the Department of Statistics and Districts Revenue Administration. The survey will cover the entire population of the state and government expects it to be completed within a period of nine months. Based on the information emerging from this survey and further studies, government will announce appropriate decisions regarding the number of composition of the groups of

separate reservation and their respective percentages of reservation within the overall limit of 50 per cent for Backward Classes. It may be noted that arrangements on these lines are in force in some other states.

7. The above decisions have been taken in consultation with the Government of India.
8. In pursuance of paragraph 6 for undertaking the comprehensive survey, the government has appointed Thiru P.V. Venktakrishnan, I.A.S. Special Commissioner and Commissioner for Land Reforms, to be the Special Officer for the survey.<sup>27</sup>

This did not satisfy the Vanniyar sangam by any chance. Dr. Ramdoss said "while the hungry man needs food immediately, the Governor asks him to wait for nine months. There cannot be anything more atrocious than this."<sup>28</sup> They continued their stand on poll-boycott and said the Government had voluminous reports of the Tamil Nadu first Backward Classes Commission, the A.N. Sattanadhan and Tamil Nadu second Backward Classes Commission, the Ambasankar Commission. Instead of formulating such a survey, the

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27. **Indian Express**, 13 December 1988.

28. *ibid.*

Vanniyars demanded a reservation over their 65 lakh population as documented in the Ambasankar report.

When the DMK ministry took over, after the elections in January 1987 under the mounting pressures of Vanniyars they introduced the system of compartmental reservations in March 1989. The Vanniyars, according to the Ambasankar report constitute about 19% of the other backward classes population. They were given 20% reservation along with the other Most Backward Classes and Denotified communities out of the over all 50%.

The 'political wing' of the Dr. Ramdoss led Vanniyar movement was yet another landmark of the stage three of the agitation. The *Pattali Katchi* as it was then called was launched in Pondicherry in 1988, quoting the Vanniyar activists to "*transform the social ambitions of the sangam to a Political reality.*"<sup>29</sup>

The style of the movement had every requisite of a political party. The leader Dr. Ramdoss has his own private security brigade and is generally as stated earlier equipped with not less than a convoy of twenty five cars. It is also like any other party, ridden with internal squabbles of many

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29. Indian Express, 12 September 1988.



shades. This being the development of this caste based political party, today it stands as the *Pattalai Makkal Katchi*.

We have thus discussed the several aspects of the politicisation process and the collective mobilization. The Vanniyar Ideology and their fourfold objectives, with their demand for the 20% reservation and their quest for the Most Backward Status have received focus in the background of the immediate social, economic and political reasons. We have also discussed the collective mobilization in three stages for clarity and better understanding.

**C H A P T E R - V**

## Conclusion

The present study aimed at the study of the Vanniyar Caste Movement. The curve of the Movement has been highlighted within a socio-political perspective. The study has been carried out keeping in mind the social background of the Vanniyars. Crystallization of the caste identity, the Politicisation process and the collective mobilization formed the central issues.

The background sketch of the Vanniyars analyzed several mythological arguments, historical evidences and literary sources. These documents dealt at length with the origin, the initial status and placement of the Vanniyar caste within the Tamil Nadu social structure. Their royal lineage and the present day backwardness was indeed a contrast. Hence the Vanniyars disagreed as early as 1833 to the humble agriculturist labourer label granted by the census officials and demanded kshatriya status.

The Tamil Nadu social structure by and large is a three fold one comprising the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins (or

shudras) and the untouchables (or Adi-Dravidas). The middle strata of the non-brahmins was the largest which included the Vanniyars. Though the Vanniyars were a strata above the untouchable Adi-Dravidas, they were a backward caste.

The sub-castes and the district-wise population of the Vanniyars were sketched. They thickly populate the northern districts of South Arcot, North Arcot, Salem and Dharmapuri.

The social life of the Vanniyars including their marriage, kinship pattern, religion, social distance and education was meticulously sketched and analyzed to give emphasis to the background. The preferential marriage pattern prevalent among the Vanniyars was of the paternal cross cousin, maternal cross cousin, uncle niece and exchange of sisters or classificatory sisters types. Widow remarriage was prevalent and infant marriage was a freak occurrence.

Their kinship network exhibited two basic relationships. The *Pangali* network or the agnates and *samandi* network or cross cousins.

The Vanniyars were found to be a religious lot. They were either saivites or Vaishnavites and were also found to

be demolaters. The concepts of chosen God, village deity, family Gods were familiar to them.

Social distance was practiced bsaed on the purity-pollution principles. These were practiced between Vanniyars and Vellalars, Vanniyars and Harijans in the northern districts.

The Vanniyars' economic conditions have been discussed based on several village and district studies conducted in the Vanniyar dominated areas. The political context of the caste movement was sketched in two parts - the evolution of backward classes and the evolution of reservation within Tamil Nadu.

These background factors thus discussed, reiterated the backwardness of the caste. They also formed the preliminary reasons of the caste movement which demanded reservation for their castes in educational and employment areas.

The crystallization of the Vanniyar identity gradually evolved and emerged as the Caste Association. The existence of this was traced and discussed in the relevant chapter from the nineteenth century. The process of sanskritisation and the immediate rejection of the same was also analyzed with a comparison between the Nadras of Tamil Nadu who also went through a similar process.

The conceptual issues which emerged from this study correlate to the indicators of a social movement as suggested by M.S.A. Rao and T.K. Oommen. M.S.A. Rao put forth indicators of a social movement, such as ideology, collective mobilization and orientation toward change. T.K. Oommen, suggested institutionalised collective action, ideology, organization and mobilization, as the indicators.

The Vanniyar ideology is to fight for the rights of the backward classes in general. The four fold objectives of their movement in the past were based on this ideology. These objectives include: (i) educational and employment reservations formulated on a caste based population to be surveyed immediately; (ii) based on the above survey a reservation of 2% in central services and 20% in state services was to be implemented; (iii) the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report and (iv) in accordance with the above Mandal Commission Report, the scheduled caste reservation was to be increased from 18% to 22%.

An institutionalized collective action was evident during the process of collective mobilisation. This collective mobilisation process was analyzed in three phases. The mild early phase, the turbulent middle phase with the highlights of road roko, rail roko and other agitations, and the last phase earmarked with the poll

boycott, the emergence of caste based political party and the deadline toward fulfilling their demands.

An effective organisation, both for its social service wing and political wing, had emerged within the caste association. This has been dealt with in the relevant chapters. The former evolved different cells for different purposes. The political wing too had an effective organisation with several councils.

The movement was, by itself, oriented towards change. It was oriented towards better benefits for the Vanniyars. This, they tried to achieve by demanding reservation for their castemen both in educational and employment areas.

The caste movement did succeed in achieving its demand for reservation. The study stressed the fact that the social, political backwardness of the caste, along with other reasons was the main instigator of a movement of such wide proportions. The network among the caste men did provide an efficient network of communication which helped in the crystallization of the caste identity. The politicisation process did act as the main path toward achieving their goal of 'Most Backward Classes' status and 20% reservation in the state's reservation policy.

The positive outcome of the caste movement involves several issues. They are, the effective intra caste communication system which helps in the crystallization of the caste identity. This led to the formation of an efficient Caste Association. Through such an Association, several welfare activities were carried out in several spheres of life. The economically well off among the caste, realised the problems of the economically weaker sections. This was primarily done through several caste publications, and articles in dailies, weeklies and journals. The 20% reservation and the Most Backward Classes status achieved is of course the crux of the issue. This is bound to raise the educational levels and employment opportunities of the Vanniyar youth.

Much like the above mentioned positive outcomes, the movement had a couple of limitations. The Caste Association did provide an effective network of communication among the caste men and paved way for the crystallization of the Vanniyar identity. This had its own limitations. These Associations, as such, do parochialise the citizens in a democratic society, as also opined by Rudolph and Rudolph. They tend to boil down patriotism to caste group loyalties.



The intensity of the movement turned violent in the second stage. Ultimately, it was the common man who suffered the most. Their rail roko, road roko and in the process their violent activities, in and around the four northern districts - the strong Vanniyar belt, led to paralysing normal life under circumstances of acute tension which crippled and mutilated all walks of a common man's life. The fact that the Vanniyar caste based political party, the 'Pattalai Makkal Katchi' still exists, may also be interpreted as the Vanniyar political opportunism and their ploy for political power gain.

The goal of reservation though achieved is not all. The Indian state's approach to development ought not to stop with awarding reservation to the backward and the downtrodden. It may be the immediate solution but the long term impact on change and social integration must be kept in mind. Though reservation is granted, the government should realise the need to measure the utility of such reservations. It would also help to improvise the country's approach towards development. The researcher takes the opportunity to suggest that the government should conduct surveys at a regular pace of 5 years. These would help

deduce if reservation, as such, has helped that particular section which was awarded such reservation. Such a process ought to be devoid of politicisation and the usual delay. Compulsory education could also be another option. If the children are all equally educated on par with the upper castes, then such reservations at the employment stage may not be necessary.

Time constraints and the vastness of the study hindered the researcher to take up a more detailed study. Yet care was taken to present a thorough analysis. The study highlighted the curve of the caste movement with a socio-political perspective. There is further scope to study several aspects of the movement like the emergence of the caste based political party and the active Vanniyar politics in the Northern districts which always keep simmering.

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# B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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