

**Caste, Community and Identity Formation
The Paraiyars in Late Eighteenth and Early
Nineteenth Century Madras**

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Certificate

Certified that the Dissertation entitled “**Caste, Community and Identity Formation: The Paraiyars in Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Madras**”, by **Aparna Balachandran** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the **Degree of Master of Philosophy** is her original work to the best of our knowledge and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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INTRODUCTION

This study is an exploration of the world of the outcaste Paraiyar, both in terms of their self-perception and the images that Tamil society had of them in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Madras. An understanding of Paraiyar identity at this time in terms of a notion of 'community' could provide valuable insight into the emergence of 'modern' Paraiyar consciousness and questions of cultural nationalism that are central to Dalit polemic in South India.

Community and Identity

My main focus will be on the different ways in which Paraiyar 'community' identity came to be constructed and expressed in the city of Madras in the early colonial period. The classic work on the emergence of political communities in Tamil Nadu is Suntharalingam's *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India* in which a transformation in public consciousness is seen as a result of the proliferation of print, 'modern' education and the growth of 'native associations' in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹ Thus it was in the meetings of the Hindu Literary Society and the Madras Native Association and in the corridors of the Madras High School that the political awakening of the elite in Tamil society took place.

Extant studies on lower case movements in Tamil Nadu are invariably located within this framework. They also suggest teleology of change that makes

¹ V Suntharalingam, *Politics and Nationalist Awakening in South India, 1860 - 1947*, Tucson, 1978.

the assumption that an informed public culture in the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of political communities with homogenised, coherent identities. Thus Eugene Irshick's analysis of the political dimensions of the Non Brahman movement in Tamil Nadu or Barnett's investigation into the culture of Tamil nationalism are all based on the influence of nineteenth century rationalism.² This premise is also evident in histories of Dalit mobilization.³ Hardgrave's account of the Shanars of Tirunelveli for instance, describes their political assertion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a result of a shift from a 'primitive', internally differentiated community to a 'modern' cohesive one, the change being wrought by the opportunities opened up by the British.⁴

My study proposes to rethink both the chronology as well as the teleology of this kind of scholarship. I suggest that in order to understand the Paraiyar encounter with the modern, it is necessary to shift our temporal focus back to the early nineteenth century. I will also argue that the 'public sphere' as it existed at this time did not define an inevitable direction of change, or confer a coherent identity on different sections of Tamil society; instead it provided a space for

² Eugene Irshick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916- 1926*, Berkeley, 1969; Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Princeton, 1976. For studies of other regions see Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873- 1930*, Bombay, 1976. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge, 1985;

³ Very often 'outcaste' movements are seen as offshoots of Non Brahman or lower caste ones. In fact present day Dalit polemic constantly makes the point about 'separateness' from the Non Brahman Movement, often calling them traitors to the cause, See T P Kammalanathan, *Mr K Veeramani, MA, BL is Refuted and the Historical Facts about the Scheduled Castes Struggle for Emancipation in South India*, North Arcot, 1985.

⁴ Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamil Nadu: The Political Culture of a Community in Change*, Berkeley, 1969.

negotiation within it. The process of identity formation therefore has to be seen as open ended and complex.

In my study of Paraiyar 'community identity', I will analyse the process of their negotiation with civic and religious life in a changing political and social culture. This will let us move into the world of the everyday to look at the process of identity formation rather than focus only on acts of collective violence or the study of folklore. Paraiyar petitions and memorials indicate lower caste participation in debates surrounding 'contested areas' like urban Paracheris or military encampments as well as religious disputes over chapel building, burial land or the nomination of caste heads; all these served to elicit a variety of collective responses from the Paraiyars. What were they saying about themselves? Was their sense of collectivity a cohesive, modern one? In this dissertation, I will suggest that there was, in the early nineteenth century, an important public expression of a collective sense of self with clearly articulated demands and interests by the Paraiyars. At the same time it is crucial to note the often-ambiguous nature of this identity. Thus the collective 'political demands' of the Paracheri petitions coexisted with unquestioned adherence to the vertical solidarity of the 'traditional' Right Hand caste; demands by Christian Paraiyars for land for chapel building and burials co-existed with those for 'Heathen' caste headmen.

What makes the city of Madras so peculiarly conducive for this kind of analysis? By 1800, Madras had been transformed from a fishing village to a modern metropolis that was the seat of government in South India as well as being a major centre of trade and industry. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the

Paraiyars constituted ten percent of the city's population⁵ and by 1830, at least forty identifiable untouchable settlements existed within Madras.⁶ As the East India Company began to settle down, administrative and military establishments had to be built within Fort St George; suburbs had to contain residential quarters, hospitals, churches and schools. Both the physical labours required for the setting up of Madras as well as the domestic service required by Europeans in the city was provided by the low castes. Nearer the seat of government, residents of Madras, including the Paraiyars were daily witness to and active participants in the process of petitioning and representation to the government. Although the layout of Madras was indigenous in form, there were certain important differences. Each suburb and locality was extremely important as a unit of social organisation and gave its residents a distinct sense of identity. The question of the customary practices in each of these units in relation to that in Madras proper, therefore gave rise to many a dispute as did the definition of boundaries. Moreover, the 'new' urban spaces became the sites for the Paraiyars to express themselves on various issues. An important example is the Paracheri, - unlike its rural counterpart it was not recognised as sacrosanct and 'fixed' by the urban population and the Government. Efforts to prevent Paracheri encroachment produced a remarkable amount of Paraiyar solidarity.⁷

⁵ The Manual of Administration of the Madras Presidency, Madras, 1885, pp 68 – 69

⁶ Susan Neild, 'Colonial Urbanism: The Development of Madras City in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1979, p 227.

⁷ In fact, the colonial city was to inspire many lower castes to figure the city as utopia in their writings and speeches in the late nineteenth century. The city's heterogeneity, and the existence of 'Circar space' free of the trespass of caste sensibilities are often cited. Of course in actual case, caste divisions and the recognition of caste status by the Government were a part of the reality of life in Madras. It is however, interesting that it was capable of this kind of appropriation. I am grateful for a conversation with V Geeta in Madras about this.

Christianity

The ambiguities in the Paraiyar identity are most startlingly seen in relation to Christianity. There is a great deal of work on the 'mass' or 'corporate' conversions of the lower castes to Protestantism in the nineteenth century, the most detailed and empirically rich being Frykenberg's on convert groups in Tirunelveli.⁸ As proponents of an ideology of egalitarianism and social resistance, the influence of Protestantism has been seen as pivotal to social resistance. By the end of the nineteenth century, conversion to Protestant Christianity became so widespread that the noted ethnologist, Edgar Thurston commented that the words 'Native Christian' had become synonymous with Paraiyar.⁹ However it becomes important to recognise that as powerful as the ideology of egalitarianism was, particularly in a context where the indignities and inequities imposed by the caste system were particularly severe, there was no straightforward acceptance of the Christian doctrine. With some exceptions like the analysis of Dick Kooiman who links untouchable conversion with economic crisis,¹⁰ historians have been peculiarly unbothered by the palpable confusion of missionaries as they dealt with 'backsliding', frequent denominational changes and the retention of 'Heathen'

⁸ See Robert Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reform upon society in South India during the late Company period' in CH Philips and MD Wainwright eds, *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernization c 1830 - 1850*, London, 1976. Another example is G A Oddie, 'Christian conversion in the Telegu country, 1860 - 1900: a case study of one Protestant movement in the Godavery - Krishna Delta', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 12, No 1, 1975, pp 61- 79.

⁹ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. 7, p 140

¹⁰ Dick Kooiman, 'Mass Movement, Famine and Epidemic. A study in Interrelationship', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 25, No 2, 1991, pp 281- 301

practices.¹¹ This is perhaps an inevitable omission, given the spectacular nature of mass conversions to Protestantism or the high drama of the Hindu backlash that followed.

Also scarce are accounts of lower caste conversions to Catholicism. If a corrective is needed to nuance the study of the low caste Protestant convert, the picture is even more complicated in Catholicism. With its strong emphasis on ritual and ceremony and an ideology of acculturation which had been a part of south Indian society from as early as the sixteenth century, Catholicism was heavily indigenised in its religious traditions. There is a large corpus of work on how the convert religions – Islam and Christianity were deeply influenced by local religious and cultural assumptions. Imtiaz Ahmad for instance, has analysed the impact of indigenous traditions including those of caste and domestic rituals on Indian Islam.¹² For south India, the most impressive scholarship of this kind is Susan Bayly's *Saints Goddesses and Kings*.¹³ Bayly's contention is that there was no fixity about religious traditions in the eighteenth century; based around cults of warrior heroism or bhakti devotionism they were volatile and ephemeral. Even as temple and pilgrimage places grew under the patronage of the warrior rulers or the poligars, for the worshipper there were no clear boundaries between the deities and holy places of 'Sanskritic' and those of the popular blood and power divinities.

¹¹ This is apparent in any cursory reading of missionary correspondence, journals, mission reports etc.

¹² Imtiaz Ahmad, *Caste and Social Stratification Amongst Muslims in India*, New Delhi 1973; also *Ritual and Religion Amongst Muslims in India*, New Delhi, 1981.

¹³ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700 – 1900*, Cambridge, 1989.

According to Bayly, this kind of flux and assimilative dynamism precluded the possibility of 'missionary imperialism' or unilinear Islamisation in India.

What did the existence of fuzzy boundaries between religious traditions mean to the lower caste convert? I will argue that this phenomenon was concomitant with a strong Christian identity. This is an alternative viewpoint to that of historians like Harjot Oberoi who claim that there was at this time an inherent ambiguity in Indian society over the issue of religious affiliation. He claims that it was only in the nineteenth century that political, administrative and cultural changes particularly the census, social mobility and an increase in the propaganda of Protestant missionaries that religious self-identification became marked.¹⁴ In fact, the early nineteenth century was witness to a series of Paraiyar demands for land for chapel building or burial as well as participation in a series of Christian attacks on mosques all over Madras Presidency. However, the Paraiyar's notion of Christianity was amorphous enough to accommodate indigenous religious practices or even 'Hindu' caste heads.

In my treatment of Protestantism, I will move away from the lower caste convert. I will instead attempt to address the problem in that the accounts of Protestant conversion - the assumption of a monolithic attitude of missionaries towards caste and conversion. There has also been relatively little scholarship on the mentality of upper caste converts. Too often is conversion seen as a 'change from one way of life to another; from one set of beliefs or opinions to another; and from one party, religion or "spiritual" state to another. This definition, put forward

¹⁴ Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, 1994, pp 1 – 35

by Frykenberg,¹⁵ has only recently been more nuanced by the appearance of scholarship like Dennis Hudson's account of the conversion H. A. Krishna Pillai or Antony Copley's survey of upper caste converts which pays greater attention to the social and cultural pressures and influences the latter was affected by.¹⁶ I will, through several case studies, explore the ambiguities in upper caste Christianity.

The Agrarian Context

The Paraiyars in Madras, many of whom were migrants from the surrounding countryside, were deeply influenced by their ties with and experiences in the rural world. 'Agricultural labourer' is the identity most frequently ascribed to the Paraiyar by colonial officials, missionaries and in agrarian histories of South India.¹⁷ By the nineteenth century, the British had designated and categorised the Paraiyar as 'agrestic slaves'. There has, however been little questioning of the unproblematic imposition of the category of 'slavery' on the agricultural labour castes of South India or to historicise and contextualise the dynamics of bondage.

¹⁵ Frykenberg, 'On the Study of Conversion Movements: A Review Article and a Theoretical Note', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 17, No 1, 1981, pp 121- 138.

¹⁶ Dennis Hudson, 'Christians and the Question of Caste: The Vellala Protestants of Palaiyankottai' in Fred W Clothey ed, *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, Madras 1982 and 'The Conversion Account of H A Krishna Pillai', *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 2, No 1, 1968, pp 14-53; also Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, Delhi, 1997 pp 178 - 207.

¹⁷ The origin of the Paraiyars' 'traditional' role in rural society has been discussed in Baker's study of the Tamil countryside as well as in the works of Burton Stein and David Ludden, accepted classics on peasant history in pre colonial South India. It is held that it was in Tamilnadu's 'wet- zone areas', its fertile river valleys and deltas which had become by the tenth century, centres of a rich agricultural and trading economy, that caste titles were first used for agricultural labour. Names like Paraiyar were used to denote servility and dependence by upper caste Vellalar agriculturists who in alliance with their Brahman ritual specialists, subordinated the rest of society. See *Christopher Baker, An Indian Rural Economy 1880 - 1955: The Tamil Nad countryside*, Delhi, 1984, pp 19 - 46; Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Delhi, 1980; David Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, Princeton, 1985, pp 15 - 46.

Dharma Kumar's pioneering *'Land and Caste in South India'*, through a careful study of official reports and papers on Slavery, does reveal that the extent and nature of 'bondage' varied so greatly from area to area that there was a need for a certain scepticism as to the aptness of British terms to discuss agrarian relations in India.¹⁸ However the cultural implications of bondedness has been underexplored as far as south Indian agrarian history is concerned. The corpus of literature on this theme is far richer for other regions, Gyan Prakash on the malik- kamia relationship in Bihar for instance or Jan Bremen's insight into the aspect of patronage in labour – landlord relations in South Gujarat.¹⁹

A great deal of recent work has explored how low caste and untouchable communities create normative worlds through myth, legend and ritual performances where they have dignity, self respect and power. Gyan Prakash's for instance, discusses exploration of how the oral traditions of the kamias were used to combat their dominated existence by preserving, transmitting and performing their contestation of bondage and by bending lower caste spirit cults practices to cast the malik's domination in a unfavourable light.²⁰ For Kerala, Dilip Menon has studied the performance of the folk dance 'teyyatam' by low caste Tiyayas and Pulayas who created within it a space for the criticism of inequality.²¹ Anthropologists working on Tamil society have also recently begun to analyse

¹⁸ See Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India, Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency in the nineteenth century*, Cambridge, 1965.

¹⁹ Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories. Genealogies of Labor Servitude in Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1990; Jan Bremen, *Patronage and Exploitation: Emerging Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat*, India, Berkeley, 1974.

²⁰ Ibid
Dilip Menon,

²¹ 'The Moral Community of the Teyyattam: Popular Culture in Late Colonial Malabar', *Studies in History*, Vol 9, No 2, n.s., 1993 pp 187- 217

untouchable folklore for insight into lower caste perceptions of and negotiation with oppression and domination. Prominent examples include Deliege's reading of untouchable origin myths or Karin Kapadia's gendered perspective on the world of outcaste myth and performance.²²

Drawing on these studies, I will use archival material in conjunction with ethnographic sources to briefly discuss the mental and physical world of the Paraiyar agricultural worker at this time. This remains however, a background to my main theme – an intensive exploration of bondedness and its implications for the Paraiyars is beyond the scope of this work.

Chapters

The worldview of the urban Paraiyars, many of whom were migrants from the countryside, was deeply influenced by their connections with, and experiences in, the rural world. I therefore begin my dissertation with an attempt to briefly delineate the physical and mental world of the Paraiyar agricultural worker. In the first and second chapters I will then analyse three different forms of collective self-expression, centred in the city of Madras. The Chingleput 'uprising' of 1795 saw Paraiyars deserting their land as a mark of protest against excessive taxation by the state. This event, a ritual form of bargaining in the Tamil countryside,²³ saw the extraordinary circumstance of Paraiyar caste headmen in Madras campaigning secretly to garner supra local Paraiyar solidarity for the protesting agricultural

²² Robert Deliege, *The World of the Untouchables*, Delhi, 1997 ; Karin Kapadia, Siva and her Sisters. *Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, Oxford, 1994

²³ Bayly, CA, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge, 1988, p 175

workers. I will then discuss the content and nature of Paracheri petitions, which are far more local and politically self-conscious in character; these specifically refer to the Paraiyars' urban role as a service community to the Europeans to put forward their demands to the state. The fissures in the Paraiyar's collective identity can be seen in Chapter 3 which deals with a lower caste Left Hand - Right Hand dispute which while appearing to point to the greater autonomy of the Paraiyars within the Right hand collectivity, saw the reiteration of allegiance to the 'traditional' ideology and idiom of the latter. In chapter 3, I will focus on the various Catholic Paraiyar Churches that dotted Madras city and through an analysis of two Church disputes discuss the 'Christian-ness' of the Paraiyars as seen in their religious traditions and through dynamics of the conflicts themselves; also important was the implication of the colonial state and Catholic ecclesiastical authorities in this process. I have in my final chapter attempted to explore how the Paraiyar figured in the imagination of the upper caste converts and missionaries.

I will end by reiterating that the idea of 'community' solidarity for the lower castes has been invariably linked with mid nineteenth century developments in the political and public arena. This extremely top down approach homogenises the notion of community and sweeps the most oppressed sections of society away in the current of an emancipatory narrative. By focussing on an earlier period, I hope to historicise the public expression of collective identity by the Paraiyars. Second, by prioritising the question of Paraiyar agency in this process, I hope to throw some light on its ambiguities and inconsistencies; to emphasise that identity formation is a process of constant contestation and negotiation.

Chapter 1

WHO WAS THE PARAIYAR?

I will begin this chapter by attempting to critically use both the records of the colonial state as well as non - official sources to recreate the physical and mental world of the Paraiyar 'agricultural labourer' in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Madras Presidency. This analysis is important as a background to my main focus - a heightened articulation of a collective sense of self by the Paraiyars through a process of constant negotiation and contestation within the social and political context of a colonial urban space. In a discussion of two very different kinds of Paraiyar protests, I will argue that even as the Paraiyars of Madras began to communicate their collective interests and demands, the 'rural identity' was integral to the self-expression of the urban Paraiyar.

Labour and Bondage

Studies on the agrarian history of Tamil Nadu have invariably stressed the importance of the Paraiyars as agricultural workers in varying degrees of bondage.¹ A historiographical breakthrough was made in 1965 when Dharma Kumar in her classic '*Land and Caste in South India*' established that the great majority of the members of the 'Tamil agricultural labour castes' followed their

¹ The most sophisticated accounts of the world of the bonded labourer in India include Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Histories* for Bihar and Jan Bremen's *Patronage and Exploitation for South Gujarat*.

traditional occupation and owned little or no land in the early nineteenth century.²

There is certainly no dearth of official documentation on the subject; preoccupied as they were with revenue settlement and collection and under pressure from the growing anti slavery movement in England, the colonial state conducted a series of enquiries into the nature and extent of 'slavery' in different districts of Madras Presidency. I will examine in some detail the first of these, conducted in 1819, and which consisted of reports sent by various district and judicial officials to the Board of Revenue.

The 1819 enquiry presents a surprisingly moderate picture of the conditions of agricultural labour, in particular the experience of bondedness. For one, the Paraiyar was not reduced to a saleable commodity and although the prices of slaves have been occasionally mentioned – fifty rupees in Coimbatore³ for instance or five to ten Pagodas in Trichinopoly,⁴ most Collectors declared that this was a prerogative that the 'master' seldom exercised. Further the latter had certain obligations towards his workers - he was for example, responsible for their weddings and funerals and had to provide a gratuity at every birth and during important festivals. In Tanjore it was noted that ' If the master through

² Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India. Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1965. Kumar drew a close link between caste and occupation in this period by using evidence from official reports that used caste names as synonymous with 'agrestic slaves'. She then proceeded to extrapolate census data on caste from the early twentieth century to arrive at the number of landless agricultural labourers in the beginning of the previous century. Hers was an important intervention in the continuity change debate, the adherents of the latter theory claiming that landless labour was a product of colonial rule.

³ Letter from the Collector of Coimbatore to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 1 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁴ Letter from the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 8 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives

poverty, or other cause becomes unable to subsist and protect his Bondsmen and his family, he is at liberty to seek employment elsewhere.’⁵ In fact the Collector of Trichinopoly describing the condition of agricultural workers in his district was to comment that ‘...while it was usual for these men to be described as ... the lowest order of society involved in wretchedness and misery, and reduced to a condition scarcely superior to that of the cattle which they follow at the Plough... this theme holds a fine subject for declamation ... but it is highly erroneous.’⁶

There is in fact some reason to believe to believe that the conditions for labour were, compared to the later period, fairly favourable in the late eighteenth century South India. A low land man ratio meant that it was in the landlord’s interests to treat his labourers well.⁷ According to one Collector, the rights of the agricultural worker were ‘so distinctly established by custom, and the interests of the mirasdars so substantially affected by their good conduct and health that it is hardly possible to suppose that the mirasdars would be so blind as to cause (them) to abscond or by harsh treatment reduce them to sickness’.⁸ In addition, returns to labour were fairly high generally amounting to about two mercals of

⁵ Letter from the Collector of Tanjore to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 8 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁶ Letter from the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 8 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁷ See David Washbrook, ‘Land and Labour in Late 18th century South India: the Golden Age of the Pariah?’ in Peter Robb (ed), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi, 1993, pp 68-84.

⁸ Letter from the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 8 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives

grain; other than shares from the produce labourers were often compensated in the grant of personal cultivating rights in small areas of land.⁹

It has to be kept in mind however that the image of the unfree but relatively well treated agricultural worker that the 1819 enquiry projected has to be treated with a certain amount of judicious scepticism. In their eagerness to understand and categorise agrarian relations in the countryside, the term 'slaves' was applied to low or outcaste labourers. In most of Madras Presidency except perhaps the Malabar, this usage was problematic because the conditions of chattel slavery could seldom be applied to the Indian situation. British officials were often puzzled by the fact that labour was not seizable or transferable property nor was it completely devoid of personal rights. In 1819, the Board was to comment that '....slavery as at present understood in Europe cannot be said to exist in India, there is a class of people denominated 'slaves', their condition, treatment and circumstances differ very widely from that of the unfortunate beings in the West Indies or Africa.'¹⁰ These comparisons continued to persist resulting in an evaluation of 'slavery' in South India not being judged on it's own terms.

The Company was extremely reluctant to institute drastic changes in the agrarian structure especially at a time when paramountcy was just being consolidated and there was a great fear that revenue collection would be affected. Faced with burgeoning pressure from the anti slavery movement there was a very

⁹ See Washbrook, '*Land and Labour*', pp 68-71. He also makes the point that in the 18th century subsistence from labour was supplemented by other activities like weaving and animal husbandry.

¹⁰ Letter from the Secretary to Government in the Revenue Department, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 840, 25 Nov, 1819, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

real possibility that the reality of the lives of agricultural workers was played down to protect the revenue interests of the Company. The Collector of Trichinopoly contemplating the possible abolition of slavery was to wonder whether the move would leave the Government with any claim on the mirasdars who according to him would say:

You have taken away our means of paying; you have reduced us to poverty, you have abolished an Establishment that has existed for ages: and have thought proper at our expense to emancipate our slaves...by the law of our cast we are prevented tilling our land, and yet you ask us to pay a revenue, which alone can be paid from its produce.¹¹

There was also an extreme reluctance to antagonise the agrarian elite in any way. This is echoed in the confusion that is reflected in the 1819 enquiry over the origin of 'slavery'. Many an official pointed out that bondage arose out of a contract between the master and the labourer that came into existence when the latter pledged themselves to service for a sum of money and in doing so submitted himself to perpetual servitude. For the upper castes however external forces in the form of debt could not alone explain the system - for them 'slavery' was in fact inherently a part of Hindu society and the lower castes had for time immemorial been subservient to them. The 1819 Report tentatively articulates the notion that the institution belonged to the realm of custom and therefore could not be abolished entirely:

¹¹ Letter from the Collector of Trichinopoly to the Board of Revenue, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 826, 8 July, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

It is perhaps to the early division of the people and the consequent subjection of one part of the community to the other... that the permanency of Indian institutions and the immutability of the manners of the Inhabitants can be ascribed. Accordingly we find that the present state of slaves as described by the Collectors appears to be nearly the same as it was defined and intended to be by the Laws of Manu...¹²

In fact while the Paraiyar may not have been a chattel slave, as an agricultural worker, his was an extremely hard life. Paddy cultivation which required a great deal of irrigation, took place in several backbreaking stages. Further, the nature of mirasdar power cannot be under estimated; while agrarian conditions in the period might have been conducive to a more lenient, paternalistic attitude towards their labourers, the powers that they possessed if they chose to exercise them, were daunting and supported by the logic of 'custom' would have resulted in psychological dominance over their workers. Moreover, not all these prerogatives remained in the realm of theory- '...the master had at all time the command of the slave's labour ...and he could not work for any other person without the permission of the master'.¹³ They were also required to assist in domestic services, the building of walls for instance or the setting up of pandals without any expectation of extra pay; in addition all the possessions of the 'slave' including agricultural implements was considered the

¹² Letter from the Secretary to Government in the Revenue Department, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 840, 25 nov Tamil Nadu State Archives. I will discuss in detail upper caste 'logic' as far as labour services are concerned in Chapter 4.

¹³ Report from the Collector of Tinnevelly, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 840, 25 Nov, 1819, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

property of the master.¹⁴ Materially as well, conditions were not particularly favourable; the daily wage in Tirunelveli for example, was 'on the lowest scale of allowance, being generally no more than two measures of paddy per day'¹⁵ and clothing was 'very scanty except when the slaves are chiefly employed for domestic purposes'¹⁶

Most significantly, outcaste labourers like the Paraiyars were made to feel their immense ritual and social inferiority - this was particularly true in the wet zone areas, the valleys of the rivers Tambrapani, Kaveri and Pallar where the work was easier but the inequities of the caste system were more keenly felt.¹⁷ The Paraiyars were obliged to live in separate settlements with separate public amenities. For instance they were prevented from drawing water from wells of other castes but had their own next to their homes around which they placed the bones of animals so that they could be avoided. In extreme cases, when a caste Hindu spoke to a Paraiyar, the latter was obliged to hold his hand in front of his mouth to prevent the former from being contaminated by his breath; if he was met on the highway he had to cross the road to let the other man pass; touching a Paraiyar meant that a purificatory bath was required. They were not allowed to enter the houses of other castes unless they were employed there and in this case separate doors were reportedly made for them. Great care was taken not to eat

¹⁴ Report from the Collector of South Arcot, Board of Rev Cons, Vol. 840, 25 Nov, Tamil Nadu State Archives..

¹⁵ Report from the Collector of Tinnevelly, Board of Rev Cons, Vol. 840, 25 Nov, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

¹⁶ Report from the Collector of South Arcot, Board of Rev Cons, Vol 840, 25 Nov, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

¹⁷ See Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, pp15 – 46.

anything cooked by them or drink out of their vessels – in fact it was said that if a Paraiyar as much as looked in the direction of an upper caste kitchen, all the utensils in it had to be broken.¹⁸

The daily indignity of being outcaste therefore was a part the everyday life of a Paraiyar in a Tamil village. This was true regardless of occupation - for although most Paraiyars worked on land they provided other services as well. In fact the word Paraiyar has an association which has little to do with the land; it is derived from the Tamil 'parai' or drum as certain Paraiyars acted as drummers at marriages, funerals, village festivals and on occasion when Government or commercial proclamations were announced. There are references to Paraiyar fishermen and hunters as well as occupations peculiar to their lowly caste status- gravediggers and conch bearers and wailers at funerals.¹⁹ Whatever role they performed, they were seen as inherently polluting and degraded and association with other castes was at a minimum.

There was however one identity that the Paraiyar assumed that allowed him to circumvent the caste system and place himself in a position of power. Like many of the lowest castes in India, the Paraiyars had a reputation as propitiators of the spirit world that was inhabited by witches, ghosts and demons. Paraiyar exorcists, men called Valluvans were very highly regarded by persons of all castes for their powers. Thurston describes their activities thus ' In cases of supposed possession by demons... the Valluvan is consulted as to the meaning of

¹⁸ Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol 7, Madras 1909, pp 78-79

¹⁹ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, pp 77-78 and 81

a portent, and takes part in driving the spirit of the victim, sometimes using violence and blows to compel the spirit to deliver it's message and be gone...'²⁰

Other than exorcism, Paraiyar ritual specialists appealed to low caste deities on behalf of the upper castes when higher 'Hindu' Gods failed to produce the desired results. In times of drought, for example, Vettiyan or Paraiyar grave diggers performed the funeral ceremonies of a spirit called Kodumpan or the wicked one who had to be shamed into bringing her lover, the bringer of rains back to the village.²¹ Thus, Paraiyar exorcists and ritual experts earned for themselves a position in the supernatural world that was denied to them in other spheres by the ideology of caste. The upper castes were forced to acknowledge the power that low caste spirits and ghosts had to disturb their lives and their reliance on the Paraiyar to restore normalcy.

How did the Paraiyars themselves see society and the position they held in it? In 1819, the Collector of South Arcot was to declare that they '...in time became so attached to the village in which they are settled, that they seem not to consider their situation, nor to show any desire to be free and independent'.²² If resistance to domination is only understood in terms of a mass rejection of hierarchy, this was only to come in the later part of the century with the spread of

²⁰ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, p108. The Paraiyars of Malabar and Cochin were particularly celebrated for their knowledge of black magic. They were widely consulted to kill enemies and to get rid of the demonical influence through exorcism. They are best known for their practice of 'Odi' - the power to render themselves invisible or assume the form of an animal and entice pregnant women from their homes in the middle of the night, destroying the foetus in the womb and substituting other substances for it.

²¹ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes* p 85. In fact Paraiyar shrines sometimes attained great fame- an example was that of the goddess Bavaniammal near Madras where her worshippers both high and low caste, clad only in margosa leaves sacrificed thousands of sheep every year.

²² Report from the Collector of South Arcot, Board of Rev Cons, Vol. 840, 25 Nov, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

Christianity. What I am arguing for however, is the importance of noting a conscious reconstitution of identity. An interesting arena where this was articulated was in folklore; an example of a Paraiyar origin myth is one which they claimed that they are descended from the Brahman priest Sala Sambavan who was employed in a Siva temple to worship the god with offerings of beef, but who incurred the wrath of the deity one day by concealing a portion of the beef to give to his pregnant wife and was therefore turned into a Paraiyar. The god therefore appointed his brother to do duty instead of him, and the Paraiyars therefore claimed that Brahman priests were their cousins therefore giving them the right to wear a sacred thread at weddings and funerals.²³

This myth is revealing of an acute awareness by the Paraiyar of his state of degradation. It disputes the upper caste logic of servitude and inferiority being inherent in the lower castes; the fall from respectability was caused instead by a historical accident. It has been noted that in many untouchable myths this accident consisted of a violation of a high caste code - a fall from grace was often caused by the ingestion of beef for instance. The myth we are considering here is unusually interesting because while it does not question the categories of caste - the Brahman for instance was accepted as the pinnacle of society, it does not denigrate as wrongful an activity abhorrant to the upper castes but a part of Paraiyar life, ie beef eating. Sala Sambavan's crime was not that he fed his wife beef or even that he offered it to the temple deity. Theft, seen as sinful by every strata of society was the cause for his disgrace.

²³ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, p 84

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If the Paraiyars used folklore to provide themselves with a respectable past and an explanation for their suffering, they were also quick to seize the opportunities that the physical world offered them as an escape from thralldom. Desertion of land had always been a frequent occurrence; this period offered new routes of escape. Collectors all over Madras Presidency found that they were faced with angry landlords who complained bitterly that their workers had enlisted as sepoy in the Company army.²⁴ Further as colonial towns, particularly Madras began to grow, the prospects of urban employment, as we shall see in the next section also increased. The adoption of 'alternative identities' did not merely represent protest against physical hardship and a striving for social and economic mobility. It was indicative of a rejection of the belief of a society that restricted the Paraiyar to 'low caste', ritually impure occupations.

Collective action: petitions and an 'uprising'

Historians have long seen collective action as a site through which community identity is constructed and expressed through the delineation of common values, cultural referents and shared historical experience. In the next section, I will examine two kinds of 'collective action' - the first, a series of civic petitions and the second an 'insurrection'.

By the late eighteenth century growing colonial towns began to offer substantial opportunities for employment to the lower castes. This was particularly true of Madras. In 1819 the Collector of Chingleput was to remark

²⁴ 'Letter from the landowners of Canara to the Government', Rev Cons, Vol 111, 18 Sept, 1801, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

that 'the condition of the people composing the chief part of the Pariahs of the District has of late been considerably changed. This may in a great measure arise from the vicinity of their situation to Madras where this system is known to be abrogated - many of them there find employment and their proprietors would find it difficult to reclaim them...'²⁵ The setting up of the physical edifices of British rule began to demand a large number of construction workers, road layers, transport workers and tank diggers. In addition the European population required domestic servants who were usually drawn from the lowest sections of society.²⁶

Particularly rich as sources for the examination of the sensibilities of urban Paraiyars are the series of Paracheri petitions that began to appear from the late eighteenth century onwards. As the 'native' or Black Town began to grow at a rapid rate, civic authorities often began to encroach on Paracheris - the residential areas of the Paraiyars - in order to facilitate development. As a result, many of the Paraiyars began to petition the Government to intervene in their favour.

The rhetoric of occupational utility was constantly used by the Paraiyars in these petitions to assert their territorial rights. What is conveyed through these representations is a keen sense of the importance of the tasks they were performing and the insistence that those in authority recognize the value of the

²⁵ Report from the Collector of Chingleput, Board of Rev Cons, Vol. 840, 25 Nov, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

²⁶ The different kinds of Paraiyar domestic servants have been mentioned in a 1780 in 'The humble petition of all the Pariar Cast residing in Madras'. The Paraiyars described themselves as '...menial servants to the Gentlemen and Ladies of this Settlement, such as Butlers, Butler's Mates, Cooks, Cook's Mates, Roundell Boys, Coachmen, Palanqueen Boys, Horse Keepers, Grass Cutters, Dry and Wet Nurses, Water Wenches, Scavengers, Cart Drivers, Totys, Women Sweepers, and Lamp Lighters...' HD Love, *Vestiges of Old Madras*, Vol 3. London, 1929, p 165

these services. The constant complaint about insufficient pay has to be seen as an articulation of the feeling of discontent that their true worth had not been recognized. The history of their loyalty and even of their sacrifices for their European employers became a negotiating instrument in their demands for Government protection. In 1810, for example, protesting against the having to pay quit rent, the inhabitants of the ' Great Parcherry of Madras' were to declare that that:

Under Lord Pigot, the Pariayars were requested as being the Hon Company's menial servants to assist with 2000 men in the fort accordingly your servants to merit the Government favour did not mind their lives and went through all the hazard and many peoples belonging to your Petitioner's cast lost their lives. Although the Government has promised to grant your petitioner's men for these people's losses, Maniam lands or Pension during their lives but to your poor petitioners greatest misfortune they did not obtain that kindnessAt the hostilities and war of Hyder Naick when Sir Eyre Coote took the field... your Petitioners have supplied the army the army with more than 10,000 people... At the Government of General Meadows, a minute was passed... expressing that during the flag of the Hon Company your Petitioners shall not be troubled and... can live in quietness without paying any tax. And now the Hon Company... demanding the assessment tax from your poor Petitioners knowing perfectly

well that your poor and menial servants receive 'poor allowances.'²⁷

A possible reading of these petitions suggest that the Paraiyars considered their own services particularly praiseworthy because they were voluntary and not enforced by 'custom' or violence and therefore more deserving of praise. Further, in being entrusted with domestic jobs like cooking, the ' traditional' boundaries, like those of pollution were being ignored. Above all a certain confidence had to have been inspired; a sense of self worth accentuated by the fact that urban employment offered them an escape from the world of oppressive bondage and hierarchy. The Paracheri petitions are remarkable because they represented the public articulation of the collective attributes of the Madras Paraiyars and were united unmediated declarations of their interests and demands.

At the same time, the petitions went beyond immediate circumstances and reflected the deep-rooted experience of being Paraiyar in Tamil society. In a 1780 petition for instance, the fact of being outcaste is was cited as a reason for state protection - '...Your Petitioners are of the meanest Cast, and in case of troubles ...if your Petitioners should be dispossessed of their Houses and the said Ground...no other cast will entertain them in their Houses within the bound edge...'²⁸

The Paracheri petitions are also revealing of the traditional importance of land in the consciousness of an essentially landless people. It is not accurate to

²⁷ 'The Humble Petition of all the Head Pariahs and the Inhabitants of Great Parcherry', Pub Cons, Vol 370 B, 6 April, 1810

²⁸ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, p 165

say that members of the 'agricultural labour castes' did not possess land of any kind. The 1819 Enquiry, as we have already noted mentions that compensation was sometimes made in the form of small pieces of cultivable land; it has also been suggested that Paraiyars were allowed to settle waste land at concessionary rates of revenue.²⁹ However it is abundantly clear that the proportion of agricultural land in Paraiyar hands was insignificant in comparison with the upper castes. It is perhaps for this reason that the territory they were given undisputed control over in the village, their Paracheris assumed an almost sacred significance. The reverence with which Paracheris were treated and the notion that within its bounds the Paraiyar was all powerful was reflected in the fact that even Brahmans were not allowed to enter them - if they did so dung was thrown on their heads and they were driven out.³⁰ The assertion of territorial sovereignty and the exclusivity of the Paracheris gave the Paraiyars a physical space in which the highest in society were denied access just as the Paraiyars themselves were disallowed from Hindu 'sacred' spaces.

Urban Paracheri petitions reaffirmed this proprietary attitude and refused resolutely to pay taxes on Paracheri land. It made little difference to them that unlike the countryside where Paracheris were long established, those in Madras were constantly spreading and new ones springing up. The Committee of Works was to comment during 1776 land dispute that '...What they call the great

²⁹ See David Washbrook, 'Land and Labour', p 71

³⁰ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, Vol 7, p 88. Interestingly Thurston mentions that some Brahmans considered Paracheris as auspicious sites for their agraharams, their residential complexes. It appears therefore that village society had accepted the Paraiyar claims to Paracheri sacrality.

Parcharee is quite undefined as they are continually building new Hutts and encroaching on waste land belonging to the Company'. For the Paraiyars however all Paracheri land even that recently acquired was granted a history that historicised it's occupation by the Paraiyars. Thus the Paraiyars were to inform the Committee that ' Before the establishment of Fort George by the English their ancestors inhabited the great Parcharee and that the same was confirmed to them and their descendants, and has been considered as Ground allotted for the use of the Parriars...not to be appropriated to anything else...no part of the said ground may be granted away' ³¹

Interestingly, the expression of a notion of a Paraiyar solidarity was to go beyond geographical location and immediate self-interests. In October 1795, landholders in the Poonamallee area of Chingleput began to desert the area along with their Paraiyar and Palli labourers protesting against the imposition of a new tax assessment by the Collector, Lionel Place. Acutely aware of the fact that the Paraiyars were vital for the harvesting of the paddy crop, Place desperately tried to quell the tension by increasing the Paraiyars share of rice from the grain heap to four mercals from the usual three; further a proclamation was made by the Board 'forbidding any desertion on the pain of punishment not only of the parties but those who shall be found to have instigated them. ³² This was to have little effect however and in April and May 1796, the desertion intensified.

³¹ ' Minute of the Committee of Works' Love, *Vestiges*, Vol , p 130

³² Letter from the Collector in the Jaghire to Edward Sanders Esq, President and Members of the Board of Revenue' Board of Rev Cons , Vol 147, 29 Feb, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

There was no confusion in Lionel Place's mind about who exactly these instigators were. He was convinced that an 'artful intrigue' had taken place between the Vellalar mirasdars of Chingleput and their Dubash relatives in Madras to instigate their Paraiyar dependants to revolt. The Dubashes who causes Place so much concern were in fact, literate men who acted as agents and brokers to the Europeans in the city. The Collector felt that these men were the real brains behind the plot, providing crucial advice on how to deal with the government whose attitudes and functioning they were familiar with and who provided a haven for their absconding kinsmen. This plot, according to Place resulted in a large number of mirasdars coming to Madras on the pretext of submitting a petition to the Government on the behaviour of revenue officials in Chingleput. He was to complain to the Board that:

great number of the residents of Poonamallee had ever since been living in Madras and consulting the Dubashes upon the further means of effecting their object upon which they are hopeful of doing by stirring up discontent amongst the Pariars.... Under an appearance of appealing to you for redress the Dubashes and Inhabitants are virtually forwarding their new plan, for they are allowed to leave their villages in bodies to attend the Board they in the first place encourage the like means of enforcing compliance with their demands.³³

³³ 'Letter from the Collector in the Jaghire to Edward Sanders Esq, President of the Board of Revenue'. Board of Rev Cons, Vol 148, 7 March, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

Thus although it was the withdrawal of labour that had put the harvest in jeopardy, leadership and initiative was provided by the upper caste 'masters' and their allies.

This fact appeared to be substantiated by a declaration from a Head Paraiyar from a village in Chingleput from which no Paraiyar had deserted. Varadapah Moodeliar was to comment that '...we are very poor and rely on the Gentlemen's favour and protection...some Malabaris for the sake of their own advantage have excited the ignorant Paraiyars to commit disturbances thereby bringing disgrace upon the whole cast in the eyes of the Gentlemen'. He then proceeded to provide the names of thirteen persons who he claimed had instigated the Paraiyars to raise trouble; he himself fortunately had a master who had cautioned his men to 'repose confidence in the Gentlemen and obtained his favour, we should live happily'³⁴

The situation however had been somewhat complicated by several events. Place had ordered a house to house search in Madras to flush out any 'mirasdar' petitioners who had stayed behind in the city to plot and instigate further trouble with their Dubash relatives. However, only one such person was discovered, an old man of seventy, Vencatachelly Moodely who claimed that business with his creditors in Madras was what had kept him back, and he had been arrested just as he was leaving for his village.³⁵ The implications of this development were

³⁴ 'Translation of a declaration made by Varadapah Moodeliar of the village of Sirakalatoor in the Poonamallee District to Lionel Place Esq', Board of Rev Cons , Vol. 151, 4 March, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

³⁵ 'Petition from Vencatachella Moodeliar to the Worshipful Edward Sanders Esq and Gentlemen of the Board of Revenue', Board of Rev Cons , Vol 149, 10 March, 1819, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

obvious – was it possible that the protesting Paraiyars were not entirely following a plan masterminded by their superiors in Madras?

What was most extraordinary however was the discovery of a cadjan letter³⁶ which claimed to be from the Head Paraiyars of Madras urging their caste members in Karanguli, an area southeast of Madras to join the protest. It said, ‘on receipt of this cadjan you must repair to Madras . If you neglect doing so your punishment will be the disgrace of having cowdung thrown on your faces and your caste dishonoured’³⁷

In the enquiry that immediately followed the Government discovered that only one man, Uttakarten Maistry, was alive out of the three said to have authored the letter. Uttakarten Maistry categorically denied having had anything to do with the writing of the communication but admitted that he had received an reply from the Paraiyars of Karanguli, which had been brought to him about a month previously by a man from that region which stated that ‘...agreeable to your orders that we should repair to Madras for protection, we are assembling together, if you will intercede with the gentlemen on our behalf when we arrive, and defray our expenses, send your answer by the bearer and we will accordingly come...’³⁸

Uttakarten then proceeded to send the letter to an influential Paraiyar in the Great Paracheri of Madras, Peria Tomby, who would he claimed, would know

³⁶ A letter on a palm leaf or olai.

³⁷ ‘Letter from Uttakarten Maistry son of Kolukaren Maistry, Tondava Maistry. Velliam Maistry to their relations or cast people in the Carangooly District’, Board of Rev Cons. Vol 151, 4 March, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

³⁸ ‘Translation of a Declaration given in the Malabar language to the gentlemen of the Board of Revenue by Uttakarten Maistry of Paria metto dated 21st April 1796’, Rev Cons. Vol 70A, 21 May, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

if the Paraiyar caste heads had any knowledge of the affair. Like Uttakarten Perria Tomby denied all knowledge of the missive, describing himself as disgusted by it. Curiously though he informed the bearers that if the matter ever got to the knowledge of the Company he was willing to be a witness.³⁹ The countryman from Karanguli had found Peria Tomby's residence with considerable difficulty, needing to be assisted by a Company lascar, a man named Rungen who provided the Board with a detailed description of the events of that day. He recalled that

he (the 'countryman' from Karanguli) delivered the said cadjan to Paria Tomby in the presence of 4 or 5 people, as soon as he saw it he told him (the countryman) in terms expressive of anger- We who gain our livelihood by cleaning gentlemen's houses, can we pen such a letter? No, if the Company saw it they would put fetters on our hands and feet and transport us to Bencoolen (a penal colony) He then abused the persons who composed the letter- and sent us off...⁴⁰

Meticulous to the last detail the Board of Revenue attempted to interrogate the witnesses that Paria Tomby Maistry and Rungen claimed were present with the former when the letter from Karanuli was delivered. Unfortunately for Paria Tomby, three of the men questioned firmly denied

³⁹ 'Translation of a Declaration in the Malabar language by Paria Tomby of the Great Parcherry to the gentlemen of the Board of Revenue dated 22nd April 1796', Rev Cons, Vol 70 A, 21 May, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁴⁰ 'Translation of a Declaration given in Malabari by Rungen of Chintadripettah, to the Gentlemen of the Board of Revenue dated 22 April 1796.' Rev Cons, Vol 70 A, 21 May, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives

any knowledge of the event and even denied having been in Paria Tomby's house on the day in question. Although the fourth witness was also located, the Company's translator became suspicious when Paria Tomby showed great eagerness that this particular individual be questioned:

he was particularly desirous that I should interrogate Mootoo Pannen but as I had used so much precaution to prevent any undue influence on his part,....I did not listen to his entreaties...it might safely be conjectured, that no time or measures were lost and unapplied by him, whilst away from my sight, to construct this part of the evidence, with that plausible story which he supposed would fully establish the truth of the declaration given by him to the Board.⁴¹

The investigations into the Chingleput uprising suggests that the Paraiyars involved in the protest have to be credited with a certain amount of agency in the events that took place. Given the strength of the caste system in the Tamil country and the strength of the ties that bound the Paraiyars to their 'masters', it is unlikely that the Paraiyars would have 'revolted' for as long as they did without the support of the Chingleput mirasdars. Their master's warning had proven sufficient for Varadapah Moodeliar and the rest of the Paraiyars of Sirukulattur to refrain from joining the protest; Place was right when he opined that '...unless persuaded or allowed by their Master the Pariars would never have

⁴¹ 'The Malabar's translator's report of the examination of certain witnesses taken agreeably to the Board's orders communicated to him on the 22nd instant' Rev Cons,C, Vol. 70 A, 21 May, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives

thought of assembling in the manner they did...'⁴² However, he Place unable to find any real evidence of plotting and collaboration between Dubash and mirasdar 'leadership.' Once the desertion of land began, it appears that the Paraiyars began to take considerable independent initiative in the course of events, the letter to the Karanguli Paraiyars from the Paraiyar heads in Madras being particularly significant.

The very method of communication between the geographical separated Paraiyars, the palm leaf manuscript is surprising given the common assumptions about their ignorance and illiteracy; equally remarkable was the fact that it appeared to cause no ripples whatsoever amongst the officials conducting enquiries. This in itself is interesting because it opens up the possibility that the historian and anthropologist have imbibed the view of the earliest reformers in the Tamil countryside, the Christian missionaries saw themselves as the bringers of education to the lower castes. It appears however that long before the setting up of missionary schools and the mass circulation of Christian knowledge through print, the written word was used and its power understood by the Paraiyar even if actual literacy was confined to very few.

The desire of the Paraiyars of Madras to extend the protests, to be the ones to give direction to their caste fellows is expressed in the petition to Karanguli. As we have previously noted a spate of migrations meant that many of the Paraiyars in Madras were probably original inhabitants of the Chingleput area. Urban employment had allowed them a certain freedom from the ties of

⁴² 'Letter to Edward Saunders Esq, President and Members of the Board of Revenue', Board of Rev Cons., Vol 150, 14 March, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives

bondage; a possibility is that at least some of the Paraiyars there were buoyed by the confidence that came from relative independence, and linked to their caste fellows by ties of blood and a shared past saw themselves as the natural leaders of the Paraiyars. This was the basis of the appeal made to the Paraiyars of Karanguli; their call for solidarity was not based on the benefits it would bring – for these would apply to Chingleput alone- it was grounded in a sense of community. The petition merely articulated the sentiment that it would be shameful if the Karanguli Paraiyars failed to answer the call of their bretheren.

At the same time there was an unwillingness to make this solidarity public; neither Uttakarten or Paria Tomby were willing to concede authorship of the letter. This was hardly surprising given Lionel Place's reputation for corporal punishment or the Board's threats that the '...Pariars taken in insurrection ...should be employed in irons upon the public roads for six months...' ⁴³ More importantly, disclosure could have resulted in dismissal by their European employers which would have meant a return to their hard life on the land. It is highly probable that this was the reason that the 'witnesses' to Paria Tomby's dismissal of the Karanguli letter, two of whom were cooks and a third a conicopoly or accountant were unwilling to commit themselves in any way. In fact Paria Tomby's declaration in the presence of Rungen, a Company lascar with it's list of the repercussions of disloyalty to the Company sounds distinctly thearetical and too much like a man exercising caution in front of a Company servant.

⁴³ ' To the Right Hon Lord Hobart, Governor in Council from the Board of Revenue', Rev Cons,C, Vol 72 A. 18 June, 1796, Tamil Nadu State Archives

There is no indication that the Paraiyars ever turned against their 'masters' or that they critiqued the ideology of caste in any way in our period. What is clear however is that they were keenly aware of their position in society and in order to deal with their lives used myth and belief to reconstitute themselves in self perception. Many used the opportunities that the late eighteenth century offered to grasp at economic and social mobility. Many of who escaped subservience felt empowered to stand at the forefront of the expression of solidarity in moments of collective action at this time.

Chapter 2

IN DEFENCE OF RIGHT HAND 'HONOUR' THE 'CHANGING' NATURE OF CASTE COLLECTIVITIES

From as early as the eleventh century, the social history of South India was marked by the polarisation of society into two vertically divided caste sodalities - The Right Hand or Valangai and the Left Hand or Idangai.¹ By the seventeenth century this division was a particularly antagonistic one; colonial records speak of the frequent occurrence of conflicts between the Right Hand caste headed by the Komati Chettiars and the Left by the Beerli Chettiars in the towns and cities of Madras Presidency to defend their social positions and status.² The subordinate lower caste members of each collectivity usually included the Paraiyars on the Right and the artisan castes, the Panchalar or Kammalar on the Left. The arenas for competition between the two were ostensibly both physical territory and social space defined by rituals, symbols and emblems but it appears that the language of the Right and Left Hand castes was often used to articulate other tensions and grievances between various groups in Tamil society.³

¹ The description that follows is largely taken from Kanakalatha Mukund, 'Caste Conflict in South India in Early Colonial Port Cities 1650- 1800', *Studies in History*, Vol 11, No 1, 1995, pp 1 – 27.

² Right Hand leadership had been traditionally provided by the land-owning Vellalars. However, in the urban context, influential and wealthy Komati Chettiar traders took over this position. The Left in their turn were under the authority of the Beerli Chettiars.

³ For an understanding of the anthropological perspective on the significance of the Right and Left Hand castes in Tamil society in terms of a divided cosmic social body, see Arjun Appadurai, 'Right and Left Hand Castes in South India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 11, Nos. 2 – 3, 1974, pp 216 – 259.

In this chapter I will argue that conditions in the colonial port city of Madras in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries imbued the 'traditional' Right and Left Hand collectivities with a new significance which saw the upper and lower castes in each group bound to each other in a relationship of mutual dependence and reciprocity and simultaneously, an increase in the outward expression of antagonism between the two moieties. By the nineteenth century changes in the nature of political authority and 'public culture' had encouraged the loosening of the ties that bound different castes together in the Right and Left Hand groupings particularly in the case of disputes involving the defence of lower caste 'honour'. I will suggest that while this process allowed for the greater autonomy of the Paraiyars in 'caste decisions', traditional affiliations continued to persist; the formal and not the conceptual unity of the Right and Left Hand collectivities was questioned.

Violence in Black Town; Boundary Disputes and Trading Privileges.

By the seventeenth century the colonial port city of Madras was witness to a large number of often-violent confrontations that took place between the Right and Left Hand castes. I will attempt to analyse in detail one such conflict, an exercise which I hope, will allow us an insight into the expression of caste identity through competition over physical space complicated by intra-caste politics, the context of a heterogeneously populated colonial city, patronage by European trading powers and the deliberations of and negotiations with the state over the question of 'custom'. This delineation will provide the crucial context in

which the upper castes and the state used and understood the involvement of lower caste groups like the Right Hand Paraiyars in these disturbances.

In the summer of 1707, a quarrel of unusual violence broke out between the Right and Left Hand castes of a locality in Black Town called Peddanaickapetta.⁴ After troops had quelled the rioting, the Government ordered a survey of settlement patterns in the area and subsequently announced a decision to allot all the land on the western side of Peddanaickapetta to the Left Hand caste and that on the eastern side to the Right. Those of the Right Hand caste who occupied houses in the Left Hand zone were asked to sell their homes and transfer themselves to the areas officially assigned to them.

The Right Hand castes were outraged at this development. Seditious letters written in Tamil and which spoke of revolting against what they saw as the arbitrary exercise of power by the Government reached the Fort. Further, to make their point, a Paraiyar wedding was organised and celebrated in the forbidden area. By August, most members of the Right Hand caste went on 'strike' and fled to San Thome, the traditional haven of dissenters during clashes in the city.

Persuading the Right Hand caste to return proved extremely difficult for the Government. An attempt by Governor Pitt to shut up the heads of the two castes in a room to settle their differences was to make little difference. Other inhabitants of Madras - Persians, Pathans and Armenians offered their services as mediators; unconditional offers of pardon were made to the Right Hand but

⁴ HD Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, pp 25-30.

nothing appeared to be able to change their minds. The exasperated Company officials were to note that the one instance when certain members of the Right Hand returning to Madras raised their hopes was thwarted when 'they took disgust at something or other, the certainty unknown... and returned again to San Thome'. The Paraiyars were an important party in the decision to prolong the strike; it was they who physically restrained those of the Right Hand who wished to return to Madras.

The Government in desperation decided to use force - orders were issued therefore for the march of a large number of troops to San Thome. On the urging of the inhabitants of Madras, however, this attack was called off, and the new Governor of San Thome, a Hindu and Right Hand caste member finally persuaded the Right Hand caste to return to Madras in October.

This development did not however, stop the flood of seditious letters from the Right Hand caste which continued to reach the Fort; nor did it prevent the Left Hand heads from claiming that the conflicts had taken place because the Right Hand heads resented the fact that the former had recently managed to outbid the Right Hand for the Company's merchandise. The Government's attempts to settle the matter once and for all by marking out spatial boundaries were confounded by the fact that some of the inhabitants of Peddanaikapet on questioning revealed that they were unsure of their caste affiliation.

The dispute was only settled in the January of 1708, when both castes finally came to an agreement as to how Peddanaickapet was to be divided. This process was to involve the interchange of upwards of a hundred houses. Either

caste breaking the agreement had to pay a hefty fine and was liable to severe punishment.

Burton Stein has postulated that the antagonism between the Right Hand and Left Hand moieties became significant only from the Vijaynagar period of urbanisation in the fourteenth century when the land based Right Hand caste began to lose some of their status and authority with the increase in the importance of the trade based Left.⁵ There is certainly reason to believe that the expansion of trade and increasing urbanisation contributed to a growing sense of hostility between the Right and Left Hand castes. It has often been suggested that the Right and Left Hand disputes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were primarily tussles between the Right Hand Komati Chettiars and the Left Hand Beeri Chettiar merchants over trading privileges granted to them by the Company. The materialist nature of the disputes became apparent in the inception of a 1652 dispute that was sparked off by the exchange of harsh words between members of the two groups - someone from the Right Hand had claimed that a Left Hand man was 'not worth a cash' upon which the latter was to reply that the former was not worth 'two cash'!⁶ The 1707 incident demonstrates all too clearly the commercial underpinnings of these 'traditional' societal conflicts. As we have already noted the Left was to claim that it was enraged Right Hand merchants, upset that they had lost a trading contract from the Company, who started the trouble.

⁵ Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Delhi, 1980, p. 179.

⁶ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 1, pp 118-125.

From its inception the social geography of the new colonial city of Madras where most of the caste disputes that we will be considering were located provided an environment that in some senses fostered the discord between the two castes.⁷ This had a great deal to do with the aspirations and fears of the Company itself. The British in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, as we have seen, dependent on local merchants to conduct trade and manage their production. Frightened of the native population they were eager to keep order in society while at the same time not offending the sensibilities of the Right Hand and Left Hand merchants who were so essential to their well being. The survey of settlement patterns carried out in the 1707 dispute that we have just been considering is a striking example of their eagerness to maintain social order by ascertaining and enforcing 'custom', the knowledge of which was the key to power and legitimation. In fact this created conditions which served to enflame tensions; the British made their decisions based on precedent, on the advice of the heads of the Right Hand and Left Hand castes or on the pronouncements of local Brahmans. Invariably this meant that one or the other group would be offended. In the 1707 example anger against the Company's partition of Peddanaickapet was so intense that it took more than six months for the Right Hand caste to be placated and an amicable solution reached. It is interesting that dissatisfaction with official policy reached such an extent that there was a questioning of the

⁷ Patrick Roche has suggested that the idea of spatial segregation according to caste was not one, which was alien to the British. Madras itself was at this time divided into 'Black town' and 'White town' or 'Christian' town. See 'Caste and the British Merchant Government in Madras', 1639-1749, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 12, No 1, 1975, pp 381 - 487

legitimacy of the Company to govern in the form of 'seditious' letters. This was a covert expression of an attitude, which was radically different from that which the two castes professed towards the Government in petitions and representations - one of respect and confidence in the British ability to solve any dispute in a fair way.

The 1652 incident strikingly illustrates this point.⁸ In their anxiety to put an end to the rioting in Madras, the British were to order the spatial segregation of the two castes. Governor Baker was to declare that the eastern half of the 'native town' belonged to the Left Hand and the western half to the Right stating that 'the Right Hand Cast are to reside in the particular streets appointed for 'em where are to live or come none of the Left Hand Caste; and the same with the Left Hand Cast where are to live or come none of the Right Hand Caste'. It appears however that the castes themselves were not as stringent in their enforcement of spatial divisions as the state. The heads of the Right Hand castes were to claim that it was the machinations of two Brahmans who worked for the Company and who constituted the Company's panel of 'experts' that had led to conflict. These Brahmans, they claimed were the ones who the President 'on parting and appointing the streets' in order to create trouble 'for their owne ends'. What the British were unable to recognise was that 'custom' did not have rigid boundaries or definitions; it was negotiable, flexible and constantly changing according to context.

⁸ Love, '*Vestiges*', Vol 1, pp 118-125

Further the codification of various South Indian castes in 'traditional' society as belonging to the Right or Left Hand was neither uniform or fixed.⁹ The Company's attempts to 'fix' the caste affiliation of various groups in 1707 in order to divide Peddanaickapet was frustrated by the seeming ignorance of some of its inhabitants as far as their Right and Left Hand membership and loyalties were concerned. The Government was to lament that the weavers and oilmen of the area were notoriously fickle in their caste affiliation, that 'they were sometimes of One Cast and sometimes of another'.¹⁰ In the end these troublesome men were made to opt for one caste or another under threat of severe punishment. For many of the men therefore who were involved in the incident there was no either or dichotomy as far as caste identity was concerned- by insisting on opting for either the Right or Left Hand caste, by attempting to circumscribe both ceremony and space, the British were in some senses, increasing the consciousness of the differences between the between the two moieties.

What part did the Paraiyars play as members of the Right Hand caste? They were literally the 'strongmen' of the caste - these were the men who were involved in the physical fighting on the streets, who could be incited to violence by the Right Hand heads for their causes. Colonial authorities were clearly

⁹ In fact, the caste constitution of the Right and Left Hand castes varied from region to region and with no recognisable pattern or order. Artisanal castes like weavers, oilmongers, potters and service castes like washermen, barbers, coolies and palanquin bearers were affiliated to either the Right side or the Left in different localities. Kanaklatha Mukund, 'Caste Conflict', p. 6

¹⁰ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, p. 29

terrified of the Paraiyars who they considered dangerous troublemakers who had to be controlled and regulated. The targets of the troops deployed to San Thome in 1707 to end the Right Hand ' strike' were the Paraiyars. The fact that unnecessarily harsh precautionary measures tended to be taken against them was commented upon in a 1842 petition from a Right Hand caste member to the Government. Thus in a discussion of the implications of the Paraiyars being accused, without proof of exhuming a Left Hand body at Cuddalore during the course of a dispute, Cooteappa Chitty was to accuse the police of wreaking 'iniquitous violence' on the Paraiyars, forcing them to flee in such large numbers that he was witness to a Paraiyar funeral where 'none were present but women'.¹¹ An extraordinary example of the fear that the British had of the Paraiyars is manifest in proposals that the British were to put forward in 1818 to set up a spy system using Taliars or village watchmen to monitor their activities in the areas surrounding Madras to prevent them from being 'recruited' for any Right Hand causes in the city.¹²

The Paraiyars were in every way under the hegemonic control of the upper castes. All negotiations with the colonial authorities were carried on with Right Hand heads who were also constituted the state's native informants as far as Right Hand custom was concerned. Kanaklatha Mukund has pointed out that

¹¹ 'Humble Petition of Cooteappa Chitty and other Right Hand notables at Caddalore', Rev Cons, 12 April, 1842, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

¹² Letter from Acting Superintendent of Police in Madras to the Collector of Chingleput on the subject of measures to avert an impending riot in the District. Pub Cons, 21 June, 1818, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

the symbols and metaphors of the Right Hand caste tended to reinforce the voicelessness of the Paraiyars as subordinate members of the Right Hand collectivity. One way this was done was through the restricted access to Right Hand emblems - thus for instance while the Paraiyars were allowed to use a white umbrella, an important Right Hand insignia, it could not have a fringe. It was therefore recognised that the Paraiyars were Right Hand members, but members who remained inferior and dependent on the upper castes in their moiety.¹³

What did the Paraiyars gain from this association? The status of the merchant headmen was linked to the protection of the 'honour' of every member of their caste grouping;¹⁴ solidarity was also all important in order to put pressure on the authorities as well as to intimidate the other side. The preservation of Paraiyar dignity, for instance was a recurring theme in many of the disputes of this period. This became particularly crucial because as we have noted the Paraiyars were physically deployed in many of the confrontations; in 1707, a Paraiyar wedding was celebrated in a disputed street, a symbolic gesture meant to daunt both the state and the Left Hand caste. The examples abound - in 1716, the rape of a Paraiyar woman led to escalation of hostilities over the appropriation of Left Hand insignia by the Right; similarly riots at San Thome in 1790 were ignited by the murder of a Paraiyar man.¹⁵

¹³ Mukund, 'Caste conflict', pp 12-13

¹⁴ See Mattison Mines, *Public Faces, Private Voices. Community and Individuality in South India*, Delhi, 1996, pp 35-43 for a detailed discussion on the headman centred nature of Tamil society. The power of the headman was dependent on public reputation that was based on their singular ability to make things happen for their followers.

¹⁵ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 2, pp 141-142 and Vol 3, pp 385-388.

How the Paraiyars perceived themselves as Right Hand members is unclear. It is possible that the Paraiyar sense of self worth lay in the undeniable importance they had for the Right Hand caste. The frequent withdrawals of labour that served as a pressure tactic for the Right was particularly effective because of the significance of the Paraiyars as workers in a burgeoning urban environment. They were the men who were the scavengers and construction workers of Madras and domestic servants to the Europeans. The acceptance of the leadership of the upper castes was not without its moments of tension and even questioning of the Right Hand hierarchy. During the 1707 incident, it was the Paraiyars who wished to 'prolong' the strike at San Thome and were responsible for physically restraining those of the Right Hand who were open for negotiations with the Left and the state and who wished to return to Madras city.

The Right Hand Paraiyar Sepoy; Lower Caste Conflict in a Military Encampment.

A striking contrast to the 1707 dispute is one, which took place about a century later in Madras. The 1809 conflict between the Pallars and Paraiyars of Madras produced a great deal of documentation in the form of examinations and inquisitorial records. These serve as valuable evidence to analyse the difference from the 1707 incident in the self and projected images of both the Paraiyars and the Right Hand upper castes. While the earlier dispute as we have seen, was driven by mercantile competition, it involved the question of the 'honour' of all

the castes at least at a superficial level; this time the conflict was restricted to the lower castes.

In the year 1809, a proclamation from the Government was promulgated by tom tom throughout Black Town.¹⁶ It reported that 'dissensions' had broken out between the Pallars - low caste Left Hand men belonging to Tirunelveli, and the Paraiyars of Madras over 'points connected with their respective ceremonies' and that this conflict had been carried to a pitch 'dangerous to the lives of the parties and detrimental to public tranquillity'. The heads of both castes were to be held strictly answerable for the 'quiet and peaceable conduct of their various adherents' until the 'cause of difference could be ascertained and adjusted by the Government.'¹⁷

The conflict in question had broken out between Paraiyar and Pallar sepoys stationed in Madras in a military camp located near the 'caste' settlement of Chintadripetta and a Paracheri. The problem arose over the use of 'Paraiyar insignia' in the funeral ceremony of a relative of a Pallar sepoy. The Paraiyar sepoys who were joined by local Paraiyars objected strongly to what they claimed was the appropriation of their caste emblems by the Pallars; what made matters worse was that the Pallars then tried to inter the body in the Paraiyar burying ground. Alarmed by the violence that followed, the Government at Fort St George set up a 'Committee for examining the disputes between the Right and

¹⁶ Letter from the Chief Secretary to Government to the Superintendent of Police, Pub Cons, Vol 358 B. 19 May 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Left Hand Castes' The Committee pointed out that the Pallar Sepoys were 'foreigners' to Madras where the usual custom for the 'inferior castes' belonging to the Left Hand caste was to carry their dead for interment or cremation either on an open bier or on one with a canopy with a single unornamented stage'. The Pallars, in this case however had 'attempted an innovation in this custom.'¹⁸ In order to determine the exact nature of this innovation and the true rendering of 'custom' the Committee began an elaborate investigation. All Government records that could provide any kind of information were thrown open for scrutiny; the Paraiyars as well as the 'respectable natives' of Madras were also called for questioning. In addition, the Pallar sepoy of 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment Native Infantry were summoned before the Committee. It was only after this was done, claimed the Committee that they could begin to evolve a set of Regulations that could prevent the recurrence of such trouble. Most importantly, it was ordered that until the Commission submitted its report, the Left Hand caste in Madras would not be allowed to use the ornamented bier in their funeral ceremonies.¹⁹

In the highly revealing examination that followed, it appeared that the Paraiyars took exception to almost all the ornaments that the Pallars had used on the funeral bier of their deceased caste member - these included coloured cloth, plantation leaves, and pots. They complained that what the Pallars were doing

¹⁸ Letters to the Government at Fort St George from the Committee for examining the disputes between the Right and Left Hand castes, Pub Cons Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

¹⁹ Ibid.

was contrary to 'maumool'²⁰ and that 'disturbances would arise if they (the Pallars) persisted in it' but that this advice was 'treated with contempt'.²¹ In their turn, the Pallar sepoy were to claim that that the Paraiyars were being extremely unjust in their objections; the fear of the Paraiyars' threats of violence in the past and in this case, had already made them compromise on the use of certain insignia. Thus Chinna Mootoo, a Pallar sepoy was to complain that white cloth was not used on the bier because 'on a former occasion.... in Trichinopoly.... the Paraiyars of the area had objected to (their) use of it'²². Yet another Pallar sepoy pointed out that the dread that the Paraiyars would cause trouble had prevented them from using five Chemboos or pots and white cloth on the bier.²³

The Pallar and Paraiyar headmen gave their caste members a great deal of support, each professing himself extremely knowledgeable on the subject of the 'traditional' funerary practices of Right and Left castes in the Tamil country. One Paraiyar headman claimed that the usual practice was to only allow the Pallars the use of a simple bier covered with a black cloth while the other pointed out that the only funeral ornaments that he had seen on Pallar biers was a single pot

²⁰ Maumool refers to customary law.

²¹ 'Examination of Vencatachelum, A Paria invalid sepoy attached to the Right Hand caste', Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

²² 'Examination of Chinna Mootoo. A Puller Sepoy', Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

²³ 'Examination of Saravapen a Puller Sepoy' Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

placed on the body.²⁴ Their Pallar counterpart in his turn went into great detail as to type of bier allowed to each caste in the Left Hand moiety. He was to explain that the Chucklers were the ones to be restricted to the use of an unornamented bier and 'since the Company's authority had been established the Pullys (Pallars) had been allowed to carry their dead in Carnatic Palanquins'

The examination of the Right Hand heads, the upper castes of the Right Hand was surprisingly far less fruitful. Neither of the two men interviewed appeared willing to provide any kind of information regarding the normal burial customs of the Paraiyars or the dispute itself. Both claimed ignorance although, as we have already noted, the nearest 'caste' settlement of Chintadripetta practically abutted the Paracheri. The Committee's record of Arnachelum Moodeliar's statement is worth quoting in its entirety:

Arnachelum Moodeliar represents to the Committee, that he cannot take upon himself the responsibility for giving the Committee any definite answer to the question - to enter fully into the merits of the case, it will be necessary to assemble the most respectable of the Inhabitants, who are well versed in the particular ceremonies observed in funerals, and therefore begs to be excused giving any information, which in being incorrect may tend to commit him²⁵

Meanwhile, the blanket ban by the Government on the use of the ornamented bier by *all* members of the Left Hand caste led to a series of further

²⁴ 'Examination of Colunday Headman of the Pariahs attached to the Right Hand caste' and 'Examination of Veerapen Headman of the Pariars', Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

²⁵ 'Examination of Arnachelum Moodeliar the Natavan Headman of the Right Hand caste', Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 6, 9 June, 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

disputes. The Left Hand Kammalars of the neighbouring Chintadripetta settlement petitioned the Governor complaining that they were not allowed to bury the body of the wife of a Left Hand goldsmith with the 'usual and accustomed' ceremonies that they had been following for 'upwards of a century'. In addition they declared their need for a guard for the protection of the body from the Paraiyars of the neighbouring Paracheri and Camp.²⁶

This, however, was not the only example of various members of the Left Hand caste feeling disgruntled with the Government's injunction. An extraordinary petition from the 'Left Hand gold and silversmiths of Madras' called for a repeal of the ban on the grounds that the Right Hand heads themselves had declared that they desired 'no interruption' to the use of bier ornaments by the Left Hand caste in Madras and they had in fact enjoined the Paraiyars of Madras not to interfere with the 'religious right' of the Left.²⁷ If therefore, the Right Hand caste leadership did not support the Paraiyars, then surely it was the duty of the Government to 'conciliate the heartaching minds of the petitioners' and allow them to hold their funerals as usual?

This incident is particularly interesting because it is one of the few examples of Right Hand - Left Hand confrontations in which the lower castes express themselves directly to the state on questions dealing with 'custom' unmediated by the group heads. One reason for this was the new military context

²⁶ 'Petition from the Inhabitants of Chintadripetta to the Governor at Fort St George', Pub Cons, Vol 359 B, 14 July 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

²⁷ 'Petition from the Gold and Silversmiths of Madras' Pub Cons, Vol 359 B, 14 July 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

itself. It is important to note that in the normal scheme of things, the occurrence of this kind of lower caste conflict was extremely unlikely. The Pallars and Paraiyars lived in different parts of Madras Presidency and would have seldom found opportunities to meet each other in this fashion. The conflicts over the appropriation of caste insignia would usually see the Paraiyars pitted against the Kammalar who as artisans, stood on the lower rungs of the Left Hand collectivity but were nowhere as degraded in status as the Paraiyars. The military camp by temporarily stationing the Paraiyars and Pallars made up a large part of the Madras army.

What did the military identity mean to the lower castes? Till about the 1830s, army recruitment was an important avenue of economic and social mobility and men from these castes were recruited in large numbers from all over Madras Presidency. Army recruitment provided the Paraiyars with a considerable sense of self worth - as we have already noted in Chapter 1, Paraiyar petitions often referred to their long association with the army, The Pioneers which was formed in 1780, was largely composed of Paraiyars who were paid a sum of two pagodas a month and provided with pikes and light pistols. In fact landowners all over Madras Presidency began to complain of the increasing entry of the lower castes into the army. In 1801, for example, landowners from Canara wrote to the Governor claiming that 'serious injuries would be sustained by them if their slaves continued to be allowed to enter the sepoy corps and desert the land which they and their predecessors had cultivated for generations'²⁸

²⁸ 'Letter from the landowners of Canara to the Government' Rev Cons, Vol 111, 18 Sept., 1801, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

Ironically, Right Hand Paraiyars who had been seen as violent and unthinking by colonial officialdom obtained a whole new image when they entered the army. Colonel Walsh described them in his memoirs as 'brave, active and attached to their offices and service'....the Pioneer corps composed almost entirely of this degraded class than whom there exists , not in all India a braver, more efficient or zealous body of troops.²⁹ Many British officers actually lamented the fact that by the 1830s the recruitment of the lower castes into the army had virtually stopped.³⁰ The British it seems were willing to appreciate the loyalty of the Paraiyars as members of a collectivity that they understood and controlled not as faithful believers of what to them was the irrational and dangerous logic of Right Hand- Left Hand divide.

It is equally important to keep in mind that life in military encampments probably encouraged the disputes of the kind we are discussing. Since the sepoy were drawn from various regions what was acceptable in terms of the usage of caste symbols varied amongst the Pallars and Paraiyars themselves. The castes themselves made allowances for the communal nature of army life. Thus speaking of the way funerals were conducted one Pallar sepoy was to comment

²⁹ WJ Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, Madras, 1882 p286

³⁰ The reasons for the end of lower caste recruitment were multifold - one important reason was upper caste sepoy themselves. This was also the time when the notion that the superiority of an army depended on the social background of it's soldiers. Thus Wilson was to comment that it was lamentable that the enlistment of lower caste men was being discouraged in the 1830s simply to 'improve the appearance of the native army, the lower caste men being, as a rule, shorter in stature and darker in complexion than those of the better caste...'

that ' it was one way in the battalion and another way in the country'³¹ However in this case neither caste was willing to make any concessions on their stand - as we have seen the Pallars felt that they had already sacrificed a large part of the funeral ceremony in order to appease the Paraiyars; on their part, the Paraiyars were probably complacent in the fact that they were numerically far superior to the Pallars in Madras and buoyed by the self esteem conferred on them by their new military identity.

The most interesting part of this dispute is that there was little support for the Paraiyars defending Right Hand 'honour' or evidence of any kind of Right Hand solidarity in Madras. In fact the feeling one gets is that the upper castes of the Right Hand collectivity were eager to disassociate themselves from the lower, to abdicate all sense of responsibility in this case, for the activities of the Paraiyars which the state found detrimental to 'public tranquillity'.

The petition from the Left Hand gold and silversmiths of Madras declared that the Right Hand heads of Madras were themselves unperturbed by the assumption of Right Hand insignia by the Pallars. This claim had more than mere rhetorical value - one of the member of the investigating Committee, a Mr Ellis was to comment that the Right Hand heads had indeed announced that they had no desire to stop the Kammalars in their use of the ornamented bier and that custom in Madras decreed that they be allowed to do so. The Right had claimed that the Kammalars were Lingadarees belonging to the Vira Saiva sect and the

³¹ 'Examination of Chinna Mootoo A Puller Sepoy', Pub Cons., Vol 359 A, 6. 9 June 1809, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

use of the bier was a religious custom and not a caste insignia. They therefore 'bound themselves not to disturb them (the Kammalars) nor to permit any person of their caste to do so.'³²

This dispute tells us a great deal about the attitudes of the Paraiyars as well as upper caste Right Hand leadership. It appears clear that the upper castes simply would not concern themselves with a dispute which did not directly concern their power or legitimacy in Tamil society. In fact, for them the dispute would not have fallen into the usual category of Right and Left Hand disputes; it was instead one between two out caste groups who insisted on using the symbolic imagery of the Right and Left Hand castes in their conflicts with each other.

Further, there was by this time no economic rationale that could have prompted them to intervene in the dispute. One reason for this was the loss of patronage from the colonial state for the merchant- headman leadership of the Right and Left Hand castes. By 1771, the Company Merchant system had come to an end and by the nineteenth century the Company had moved away from its primarily trading concerns to administrative ones. Between 1770 and 1790, British success in political and economic competition on the coast had resulted in the eclipse of Indian traders.³³ There was therefore no material reason for the upper castes to invest heavily in the solidarity of their caste collectivities; the

³² 'Report of the Committee for Examining the Disputes between Right and Left Hand Castes', Pub Cons, Vol 359 A, 9 June, 1812. Tamil Nadu State Archives.

³³ See S Arasaratnam, 'Trade and Political Domination in South India, 1750- 1790, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 13, No 1, 1979, pp 19 – 40

need to publicly uphold Paraiyar dignity at all costs in order to maintain their support no longer existed.

At the same time increasingly, the state was taking over many of the juridical functions of the caste heads and treating each member of the collectivities separately in order to be control them with greater ease. A gradual fragmentation of the collectivities was reflected in colonial policing. In 1818, for purposes of keeping order, the Superintendent of Madras was to suggest that the heads of each caste be treated as individually responsible for their men; thus he was to declare that ‘... a steady eye be kept on the Nautwars or the heads of the Moodely cast, the several other Desoys or heads of the Baljawars, the heads of the Chitty cast named Cometis and other principal leaders of the Right Hand caste’³⁴ We have noticed how in the course of the 1707 incident Right Hand and Left Hand leaders were literally kept under lock and key till they reached a solution that could serve to satisfy their members. In the nineteenth century, as we have seen in the 1809 Black Town proclamation, Paraiyar and not Right Hand headmen were being called upon to produce sureties of good behaviour.

As far as the Paraiyars were concerned, it appears that at one level they were increasingly autonomous in their decisions and actions, even apparently defying Right Hand leadership. Was this really the case? The ambiguities in the corporate identity of the Paraiyars in nineteenth century Madras are manifested clearly here. What this unusual incident demonstrates is that while the Paraiyars

³⁴ ‘Letter from acting Superintendent of Police to the Collector of Chingleput on the subject of measures to avert an impending riot in the District’, Pub Cons. 21 June, 1818, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

were capable of asserting themselves against lower caste competitors, they continued to use the language and idiom of the Right Hand caste. Even as the upper caste disassociated themselves from the Paraiyars, the psychological need to be associated with the Right Hand caste meant that all assertions of identity were as subordinate members of the Right Hand collectivity. Through the nineteenth century the Paraiyars continued to battle for their Right Hand caste heads in conflicts with the Left over the use of symbols and emblems. In some senses then, the two disputes that we have discussed are remarkably similar. In both, the Paraiyars were integral members of the Right Hand moiety; unlike earlier this time in a physical sense, the Paraiyars were acting for themselves and by themselves. However it is clear that the Paraiyars sense of the self was located within the structure of the Right Hand collectivity.

Chapter 3

THE PARAIYAR AS CHRISTIAN

Studies of lower caste conversion in South India have largely concentrated on mass movements in the nineteenth century initiated by Protestant evangelical missionaries. The tendency has been to see the conversion of groups like the Paraiyars purely in terms of the rejection of an oppressive caste system and the acceptance of a more egalitarian Christian ideology, which enabled social protest and change.¹ A shortcoming of this perspective is to see the adoption of Christianity purely in terms of missionary ideas and activities, to homogenize the lower caste 'convert' and grant him very little agency in the process of conversion. There has also been a tendency to disregard the very large groups of lower and outcaste Christians who were the products of Roman Catholic missionary activity of a much earlier period.² Using archival sources on two Catholic Church disputes in the early nineteenth century, I hope to gain some insight into the appropriation of Christianity by the Paraiyars of Madras. In my attempt to probe the self-perception of the Paraiyars as a Christian community, I seek to analyse and historicise the relationship of the Christian Paraiyars with the

¹ See for instance, Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reform upon society in south India'.

² Notable exceptions to the focus on Protestant conversions include David Mosse, *Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A study of social organisation and religion in rural Ramnad*, unpublished DPhil dissertation, Oxford, 1986 and Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*.

Catholic ecclesiastical authorities, with 'Heathen' Paraiyars and with the state.³ Equally important is an understanding of the dynamics of everyday life for the Paraiyars in a growing urban colonial town and how this affected their sense of community and religiosity.

Catholics in Protest: two Church disputes in early nineteenth century Madras

In the year 1812, the Judge of the Supreme Court of Judicature at Fort St George received a 'humble' petition from 'all the Christian Pariahs residing at St Thomas Mount' complaining against the conduct of the Bishop of Mylapore and the Priest of the Mount Church. The petition declared that these two men had, contrary to the 'rules and regulations' of the Catholic Church appointed a most unworthy character, a man named Rayahmundoo as the head of the Christian Paraiyars. The petitioners also claimed that the Bishop's decision to excommunicate them from the Church was extreme and unjust. Since their appeals to the Bishop had fallen on deaf ears, they now turned to the British government, 'their sole Guardian Angel and Protector in the Coast of Coromandel.'⁴

³ When early Europeans especially eighteenth century missionaries used the term 'Heathen' or pagan they meant what we would today call 'Hindu'. It is important to note however that at this time no exclusive orthodoxy defined what was 'Hindu' from what was not. For a discussion on the terms 'Heathen' and 'Hindu', see Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion' pp 190- 191.

⁴ 'The Humble Petition of all the Christian Parriars residing at Saint Thomas Mount' Pub Cons, Vol 400 A, 27 Oct, 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

The Tamil notice of excommunication, which had been put up in the Mount Church by the Priest, certainly appeared unequivocal in its tone. 'We,' stated the notice, 'have turned them (the 'rebel' Paraiyars) out of the Church without granting them anything that pretends to it'. Further, for good measure, the Christians from the town and Camp had been asked to keep away from the 'rebels'- 'neither receive them for any business whatever nor keep their conversation.'⁵

The reply from the government was swift - it made it clear that the office of headman was a civil one and consequently not one which the church had any authority to fill. It considered that 'the Native Christians' were not guilty 'of any crime against morality or religion' and it therefore recommended that the order of excommunication be repealed.⁶

A month or so later an agitated Bishop of Mylapore was to send a series of extraordinary documents to the Government, which were to throw startling new light on the affair. It appeared that the 'Christian Pariahs' of San Thome were in fact trying to appoint the head of the Heathen Paraiyars, a man named Cauden Cooty, as the Christian caste head. Cauden Cooty himself had sent a petition to the Bishop putting forward his claim to headmanship and signed with

⁵ 'Copy of a Malabar Public Notice Published in the Church of the Mount Church', Pub Cons, Vol 400 A, 27 Oct, 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁶ 'Letter from the Government to the Acting Bishop of San Thome', Pub Cons, Vol 400 A, 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

the names of Heathen, Catholic and Protestant Paraiyars.⁷ He was supported by a man named Philip who claimed to be the present head of the Paraiyars and who expressed his desire to work with Cauden Cooty.⁸ Outraged, the Bishop pointed out that investigations by the Vicar had proven that Rayahmundoo had held the post of headman for twenty five years in which period he had been found to be both 'diligent and attentive'. It was clear to him that Philip, Cauden Cooty and their supporters obviously had motives other than the welfare of their fellow Christians for the actions they were taking. The shocked Bishop was to declare that while he had no wish to interfere with the 'Cast affairs' of the Paraiyars, he could not possibly condone a Heathen being allowed to manage church affairs and administer the sacraments. To appoint a Gentile⁹ as the head of the Christians was 'entirely against religion and offensive to God'. Would Heathen law allow for a Christian head?¹⁰

Paraiyar congregations in other parts of Madras were to similarly bother church officials by their un-Christian relationship with Heathens. Two years after the San Thome incident the Governor of Madras was to receive yet another petition, this time from 'all the Christian Pariars of the Great Parcherry of

⁷ 'From the Episcopal Governor regarding the "the Humble Petition of Cauden Cooty, head and the rest of the Christian and Heathen Pariahs of St Thomas Mount" '. PubCons, Vol 400 B, 17 Nov 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁸ 'The humble Petition of Philip, Head of the Christian Pariars at St Thomas Mount to the Episcopal Governor', Pub Cons, Vol 400 B, 17 Nov, 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁹ Gentile refers to a Jew. The Bishop was making the point that no man of another faith could be head of the Christians.

¹⁰ 'From the Jose de Graca...Ecclesiastic Governor and Episcopal Administrator of the Bishporic of Mallapoor', Pub Cons, Vol 400 B, 17 Nov , 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

Madras' who belonged to one of the city's Capuchin churches. The petitioners claimed that nine men of their caste had, with the support of the Superior of the Capuchin Church 'wrongfully' appropriated the position of caste headmen. Now the nine had taken over the key ceremonial positions in the Church's chief festival, the 'Assumption of the Blessed Mary'. Further, the petitioners also complained that the Superior of Madras had deliberately, 'maliciously, on purpose' induced the Superintendent of Police to punish all those protesting against the proceedings with impunity to prevent any kind of untoward incident. The petitioners, who strongly opposed this move, were made to pay a fine of twenty pagodas in lieu of corporal punishment. The fact that the Superintendent of Police was present with his retinue of peons meant that everybody other than the petitioners meekly obeyed the nine 'usurpers' for fear of being thrown into prison as 'riotous vagabonds'.¹¹

The Christian Paraiyars therefore made a series of appeals to the government beginning with one to ask the Superintendent of Police to cease interference in the internal affairs of the caste. After all, they argued, there were already persons of authority, instituted by the Archbishop of Goa and sanctioned by the Government to regulate church affairs. They demanded that the government ensure that the festival be conducted according to custom and only under the supervision of the Bishop of Mylapore.

¹¹ 'The Humble Representation of all the Christian Pariars of the Great Parcherry of Madras', Vol 422 B, 23 Sept and 4 Aug. 1814, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

The Superior of Madras was to send the government a detailed reply to this complaint. 'All the Christian Pariars', he claimed, 'were men of low character, one being a drunkard and none with the power to interfere with ecclesiastical affairs'. In fact since their conduct was so reprehensible that that 'no spiritual punishment would suffice' the men had to be handed over to secular police authorities. Further, the allusions to the superior authority of the Archbishop of Goa were unwarranted since the Church was in fact answerable to quite another authority, the 'Propoganda de la Fide'. The Superior firmly declared that he had no knowledge that the nine men referred to as 'usurpers' in the petition were anything other what they said they were - if indeed they were impostors, then the Superior would have no hesitation at all in having them strictly punished. His motives in the whole affair were completely transparent; his only intention had been to prevent the interruption of church festivals and to stop the hurling of insults at heads of caste, an extremely serious offence. As far as he could see the only aim that the petitioners had in asking the Superintendent of Police not to interfere in the church's internal affairs was to allow the former to violently disrupt the proceedings of the church.¹²

On the surface this incident appears remarkable only for the fact that as in the 1812 dispute the Paraiyars of Madras had taken it upon themselves to protest against what they saw as the unjust behaviour of their clerics. The picture,

¹² 'Observations on the Petition presented by the Pariahs of the Paracherry of Madras to His Excellency the Governor in Council bearing date 6th August 1814', Jud Cons, C, Vol 423, 1814, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

however appears more complicated when one reads a notice issued by the members of the Capuchin Brotherhood who were generally oversaw the celebration of Catholic festivals in Madras. Paraiyar headmen, according to the Brotherhood, were not to be trusted; in this particular church they had over a period of twenty years allowed thefts to go unchecked, and instead used a great deal of church funds for bribery of various kinds. Thus, they purchased 'cakes and fruits' for 'Portuguese and European Gentlemen' and even more shockingly, 'saltfish and snuff' for Chinniah Moodeliar, an influential 'Heathen' head. Most importantly they collaborated with Chinniah Moodeliar and the other 'Heathens' of the area to build a wall across the Christian charity bazaar from which taxes for the church were raised. This increased the size of the adjoining Hindu bazaar and seriously affected the amount of funds that could be raised for the Church.¹³

Christian Paraiyars in a 'Hindu' World

Let us first locate the two churches we are considering both historically and geographically. British San Thome adjacent to the 'native' town of Mylapore originally belonged to the Portuguese. The fame of San Thome rested on its association with the Apostle St Thomas who is supposed to have reached martyrdom there. The Portuguese set up a monastic establishment at San Thome in 1522; by 1579 it had been fortified and had several churches which were under the authority of the Bishop of San Thome or Mylapore and the Archbishop of

¹³ 'The humble representation of the Brotherhoods', Pub Cons, Vol 422 B, 23 Sept and 4 Aug, 1814, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

Goa. An observer in 1662 was to comment that the churches in San Thome included two that were dedicated to St John and the Virgin Mary where the 'Mahometans and Pagans' were instructed. It is quite possible that the Mount Church referred to in this dispute was one of these and that there were Catholic Paraiyars in Madras as early as the sixteenth century.¹⁴ In the 1660s San Thome was invaded and taken over by the Nawab of Golconda. A large number of Portuguese began at this time to flee to Madras where they set up Churches which would often be manned by French friars from the Capuchin mission. Although these Churches were under the Portuguese and hence subject to the authority of the Archbishop of Goa, there was a constant power struggle between the Capuchin Mission and the Padroado.¹⁵

Why would Christian Paraiyars desire a Heathen headman? Why would Christian Paraiyar headmen conspire with Heathen notables to the detriment of their Church? A probable answer is that the boundaries between 'Hindu' and 'Christian' traditions and beliefs were amorphous enough in the early nineteenth century to see the formal religious affiliation of the heads of caste as immaterial. The St Thomas Mount itself was venerated by people of all classes and religions.

¹⁴ See Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 1, pp 286- 339.

¹⁵ As a result of a series of Papal bulls in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese king was the effective head of the Catholic Church within the limits of his overseas territories. He nominated Bishops, endowed religious institutions and licensed religious orders. This meant that Churches that which were effectively non Portuguese in personnel were still subject to Portuguese authority. See Rowena Robinson, *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa*, Delhi 1998, pp 43-48. This of course provides an added dimension to the Paraiyar complaints in the Capuchin Church- the dissenting Paraiyars as we have seen, chose to invoke the authority of the Archbishop of Goa with whom their own Church officials had a tense relationship.

Legend had it that when St Thomas struck a rock on the Mount with his cane, he produced a gushing stream of water which when drunk with faith had the power to cure diseases. People of all faiths would regularly come to avail of this miraculous cure. A 'curious mixed worship' mentioned as far back as Marco Polo's time had also been a phenomenon at St Thomas Mount. In 1771, the Mount priest complained of Paraiyars forcing an 'elephant (Ganesh?) flag' into the Christian churches there. The flag was declared 'abominable to all Christians' and the 'mark of paganism'. The Paraiyars of the area had to take an oath before the Governor, Lord Pigot, that they would never repeat their actions.¹⁶

Historians like Susan Bayly have argued that the similarities and continuities between indigenous and Christian traditions in India have been quite remarkable. The position of the Hindu head at the apex of a hierarchical caste group was echoed in the importance given to the Christian headman in the Catholic Church. It appears that in the Paraiyar Churches he was the central to the administering of the sacraments, a function which represented the heart and essence of the Christian faith.. It is not surprising therefore that both the disputes we have been discussing were concerned with the legitimacy and behaviour of the heads of the Paraiyars. Ranking within the caste was expressed in terms of the Hindu system of 'honours' based on ceremonial precedence and the use of certain

¹⁶ In fact the Paraiyars made yet another attempt to force their 'pagan' practices into the Mount Church - as soon as Pigot had sailed for Europe. See Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, p. 41

symbols and insignia. These notions of honour were expressed in a religious style heavily influenced by Hinduism.¹⁷ Early nineteenth century Madras was witness to a series of conflicts between different urban groups over the appropriation of symbols as well as questions of ritual precedence. Important amongst these were the great temple disputes of the time as well as recurring violence on the streets of the Right and Left Hand Caste disputes. These were echoed in Roman Catholic feasts and festivals where the allocation of ritual honours played a key role in the reiteration of the significance of the Paraiyar headmen. The 1816 Capuchin church dispute, for instance, focused on the apprehension of some of the Paraiyars in the 'great paracheri' of Madras that usurpers would take over important ceremonial roles in the feast of the 'Assumption of the Virgin Mary'. Geographical proximity and ties of kinship between 'Heathen' and Christian Paraiyars meant the merging of religious styles was made even more inevitable. Everyday interaction between Hindu and Christian Paraiyars was still important

¹⁷ I am using the word 'Hindu' here because the traditions that we are discussing appear to refer to those which we would today call Hindu. It has to be kept in mind however that 'Hinduism' was not a part of the ethnographic reality of the country. It was not until the colonial period that the term acquired wide currency to refer collectively to the wide variety of religious communities, often with distinct, even opposing religious practices. For an analysis of the 'construction' of the 'Hindu' identity see Robert Frykenberg, 'The emergence of modern Hinduism as a concept and as an institution with special reference to South India' in Gunther D Sontheimer and Herman Kulke eds. , *Hinduism Reconsidered*, New Delhi, 1989; Romila Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 23, No 2, 1989,pp ; also useful is Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries. Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, 1994.

unlike the period from the second half of the nineteenth century when with the spurt in the activities of Protestant evangelical missionaries, the paracheris of Madras were more fully Christianized.

Importantly, the early colonial state added to the significance of the caste heads in the lives of all Paraiyars, regardless of faith. In chapter 1, we have seen that the European inhabitants and the government in early nineteenth century Madras offered the Paraiyars urban employment which allowed many agricultural workers to escape from their bonded existence on land. The caste heads in Madras were also used as employment brokers who were paid to provide servants to the Europeans. By 1790, the Board of Police decreed that:

the Masters of Palanqueen Bearers and other Tribes or Casts of Pariah Servants shall pay one Fanam monthly for each Servant to the Heads of the respective Casts...and out of the above Allowance the Heads of Cast shall each employ a Conicopilla, who shall keep a register of all such Persons employed...Any person requiring a Pariah servant of whatever denomination shall apply to the Head of Cast, who shall provide the servant required.¹⁸

Again as we have seen, the common concerns of the inhabitants of Madras' paracheris were articulated in petitions that were written and sent to the government in the name of the Paraiyar caste heads to signify a unity of intent. Symbolically and in actual terms therefore the importance of the caste head had moved beyond the realm of ritual and ceremony. It is in this context that it is

¹⁸ 'Proceedings of the Board of Police', Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, pp 14-15

easier for us to grasp the significance of Cauden Cooty's petition to the infuriated Bishop of San Thome who could not understand why a man seeking a religious post should talk so much of 'impertins'- 'family affairs, jewels and the processions of weddings in Tamil streets'.¹⁹

From this discussion, I hope to make two points clear. First, that it is important to note that religious boundaries in the nineteenth century were not always clear-cut and defined. Christianity was invariably influenced by local traditions. In many ways, the religious lives of the Paraiyar Catholic community in South India was marked by a continuum with the 'Hindu' socio religious context. Secondly, that circumstances in the early nineteenth century were such, that purely secular concerns were now investing positions like the head of the Christian Paraiyars with a new significance that went beyond the interests of a particular religious group. It is highly probable that these served to buttress the demand for a Hindu caste head or the collaboration of Christian heads with Hindu notables. Further these expectations were not regarded as extraordinary but inherent to the Paraiyar notion of Christianity or at least important for the general welfare of the community.

Paraiyar Christians or Christian Paraiyars?

At the same time the importance to the Paraiyars of the values specifically projected by Christianity cannot be under-estimated. For as much as Catholicism in South India was indigenised, it also produced some dramatic changes. For a

¹⁹ 'From the Episcopal Governor regarding the Humble Petition of Cauden Cooty, head and the rest of the Christian and Heathen Pariahs of St Thomas Mount' Pub Cons, Vol 400 B, 17 Nov, 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

community that stood on the feared and despised margins of Hindu society the basic premise of a church dedicated to the religious welfare of its lower caste congregation must have been a novel one. Again it was only as Christians that the group could hold a central position in their Hindu style rituals - the religious roles of 'heathen' Paraiyars were otherwise the most menial and defiling. Above all, the Catholic Church was a forum through which the Paraiyars could express themselves publicly as a community. As dependent labourers and subordinate members of the Right Hand collectivity the Paraiyar articulation of self was invariably one mediated by the upper castes.

The language of the representations made by the Paraiyars is indicative of their appropriation of the moral language of Christianity. All their actions are seen as driven by the dictates of Catholicism and the Catholic Church - these actions included protests against Church officials who did not obviously grasp the true nature of Christianity. The Christian emphasis on personal morality was used as an argument against the nomination of Rayahmundoo to the post of caste headman. The fact that Rayahmundoo was an efficient head of caste was immaterial - the argument against him was that he was a 'person of bad conduct', that he had a son who had ill treated his own wife and kept a mistress.²⁰ This attitude was in striking opposition to the Bishops whose only objection to Rayahmumndoo was that he was not a Christian. For the Paraiyar, what was important was not the religious affiliation of the men who wished to be head of

²⁰ 'The Humble Petition of all the Christian Parriars residing at Saint Thomas Mount', Pub Cons, Vol 400 A, 27 Oct 1812, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

caste; instead it was essential that they be Christian in spirit. Interestingly the Paraiyar insistence on a moral circumspect life is in striking contrast to what was usually seen as natural to their character - licentiousness. Early ethnographers have commented that the popular opinion of the Paraiyars afforded them little for either marriage or monogamy. Thurston for instance quotes a well known Tamil proverb which states that 'the palmyra tree has no shadow, the Paraiyan as no regard for seemliness.'²¹

Protests against Church authorities did not constitute the only incidents where Christian Paraiyars acted collectively to enforce what to them was the truth of Christianity. The period provides several instances of the public assertion of the Christian identity of the Paraiyars. This included a spate of petitions in the early nineteenth century asking for land to be granted to Christian Paraiyars for chapel building and burial grounds. In the early 1812, the same year as the San Thome dispute, a group of Paraiyars protested that chapel land which they had occupied for a period of forty years was being claimed by the Muslim Nawab of Wallajahpet (Arcot) as his own. The Nawab's men the Paraiyars claimed had dug up the bodies of children buried in the disputed land with such violence that in one case, the 'guts of the child' came out. As Christians, the Paraiyars moaned, they deserved better than to suffer at the 'tyranny of the moors'.²² It is entirely possible that faced with adherents of another 'convert' religion, which they saw

²¹ Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, Vol 7, Madras, 1909, p 117

²² See letter from the Secretary to the Board of Revenue to the Governor, RevCons, Vol 193, 18 Dec 1812. Also 'The Humble address of the Christian Inhabitants of Wallajahpettah Near Triplicane' Vols. 609 and 610, 5 May and 17 June 1813, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

as essentially alien and in this case antagonistic, the Paraiyars were able to more forcefully express the Christian-ness of their identity. This idea is borne out by another incident, this time in 1832, when groups of Christian Paraiyars were brought to trial for allegedly throwing pig's blood in a mosque at Nellore. On inquiry, it appeared that the incident was triggered by the occurrence of Christian attacks on mosques all over Madras Presidency at this time. The Paraiyars in this case therefore, had no specific grievances against the Muslims in their town; blood throwing was perceived as the 'Christian' thing to do and an act that expressed solidarity with other Christians in the region.²³

Self-identification as Christians was very strong amongst the Paraiyars. This feature became particularly manifest in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Madras, when the state was involved in a series of inquiries to determine the exact caste status of its inhabitants. This was strikingly illustrated during the course of the 1707 Right and Left hand caste dispute, when as we have discussed earlier, the Company ordered various groups to declare their allegiance to either side. The low caste boatmen were to declare that that they had joined the disturbance because of:

the instigation and ill advice of some designing people...whereas we are Christians, we belong to neither; and now that the Governour and Council promising that we shall have their

²³ See letter from the Collector of Nellore, Jud Cons, Vol 249, 24 Aug, 1832, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

protection and all priviledges as Christians, we solemnly promise that we will never hereafter adhere to any Casts of the Gentues.²⁴

Thus as obedient Christians these men publicly declared their intention to neither be influenced by nor participate in societal disturbances that involved 'Hindus' even as they took part in protests where they demanded their rights as Christians.

Catholicism, the State and the Lower Castes.

In this section of the chapter I would like to posit that Catholicism both ideologically and in its relationship with the colonial state in the early nineteenth century was a crucial determinant of the nature of the two disputes that we have been discussing.

It is important to keep in mind that unlike conversions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Catholic conversions that took place in an earlier period were not necessarily anti- caste nor did they emphasise the values of egalitarianism and individualism. Catholicism was essentially acculturative in ideology, it tended to see the caste system as given and envisaged a picture of Indian society which was religiously neutral - evangelisation was understood as the conversion of individuals without detaching them from their social context. In the Indian context, Catholic acculturation was to result in the curious incorporation of 'native', essentially higher caste style, of public functioning of the missionaries. A famous Catholic missionary, CJ Beschi for instance would

²⁴ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 3, p 29

travel in a palanquin attired in the garb of a Hindu guru. In fact, in some cases the missionary would adopt a high caste lifestyle, the most notorious example of this being Robert de Nobili in the seventeenth century who lived the life of a sanyassi, wearing a sacred thread, refraining from meat eating and following the principles of ritual purity.²⁵

The fact therefore, that these churches did not provide the lower castes with ideological weaponry criticising the cruelty of the caste system meant that they did not command the kind of loyalty that Protestant churches were capable of inspiring.²⁶ Paradoxically therefore it was in the Catholic Churches that we most frequently see a questioning of the behaviour of ecclesiastical authorities and the categories imposed by them. In fact, since the Catholics upheld the idea of single caste churches, it was easier for castes like the Paraiyars to articulate and act upon their opinions on the functioning of the Church unencumbered by the presence of upper caste Christians.

The nature of state support that early nineteenth century Catholicism received was an important factor in determining attitudes of the congregation towards the Church authorities. State patronage of Catholic Churches was extremely limited at this time; the Catholic Paraiyars of Madras knew that they

²⁵ Frykenberg, 'The Impact of Conversion and social reform upon society in south India', pp 191-192.

²⁶ Of course in many cases ground realities were very different from the egalitarian ideology espoused by the Protestant mission. Even mixed churches would for instance, sometimes have hierarchical seating arrangements. In the next chapter I will discuss how both missionaries and the upper castes were sometimes unable, even unwilling to get away from caste categorisations.

would receive no special benefits for being Catholic; they had nothing to lose by protesting against the activities of their Church officials. In fact they had reason to believe that any antagonism that they displayed towards their ecclesiastical authorities would be echoed in official policy. Catholic Churches had tended to excite a good deal of contempt amongst the British from very early times. In 1660, factors in Madras were complain that the ' Capuchin friars used idolatrous rites and ceremonies all of which were inimical to the true Christian spirit. '27 The British had in any case always been deeply suspicious of the French friars in the Capuchin Churches around Madras. In 1790, the Capuchin Fathers of Madras had been accused by the Madras laity of the maladministration of Church funds. The British quickly turned the situation to their own political account to put to rest their fears of sedition that they were convinced the Capuchin missions were spreading. They had long been feeling that the French had been trying to overthrow the authority of the Bishop of San Thome, a British ally and to answer directly to French ecclesiastical authorities. The Government therefore, issued a notice that all Roman Catholic Churches had to obtain a license from San Thome. Further the financial management of the Church was taken away from the Capuchin Fathers and placed in the hands of influential Madras merchants.²⁸

In other ways as well the influence of the Catholic Churches over the rest of Tamil society was constantly kept in check. An attempt by the Bishop of San

²⁷ Love, *Vestiges*, Vol 1, pp 179-182

²⁸ Ibid., Vol 3 , pp 391-392

Thome in 1701 to send a paper to all Catholic Churches in Madras asking them to publish a notice propagating the Roman Catholic religion was quickly crushed by the Governor of Madras who claimed that any such activity had to be sanctioned by the Government. Further, long established functions of the Catholic Church like the sanctioning of wills and probates were taken over by the government.²⁹ In contrast at a theoretical level at least the colonial state was Protestant and the Governments in India and England possessed it's share of active supporters of the Protestant cause in India.³⁰

Thus while perceiving themselves as a Christian community with Christian values, the Roman Catholic Paraiyars of Madras possessed a religious imagination amorphous enough to accommodate not just Hindu beliefs and practices but Hindu heads of caste. For them the dichotomy between being Christian and the possession of a religious head who was Hindu did not exist as it did for their European ecclesiastical authorities. The nature of the Catholic Church further, was conducive to rebellion and rebel they did asserting their notion of the truth of the Christian faith

²⁹ Ibid., Vol 2, pp 47-48

³⁰ I am not suggesting that the colonial state was a supporter of state religion i.e. Protestantism. The attitude of Government officials towards Christianity in general and more specifically Catholicism and Protestantism varied over time. In the early nineteenth century suspicions about Catholic churches were great particularly because they were often manned by Europeans who were involved in the struggle with the British over mastery over the subcontinent. The debate about how Christian the colonial state was is an interesting one. Frykenberg describes Company rule as a Hindu Raj propping itself up by protecting Hindu religious interests. On the other Bayly calls the British government in India a 'covert confessional state' which in particular, attempted to spread Christian knowledge in seemingly 'secular' educational material and curricula. See Frykenberg, 'the Impact of Conversion' pp 210-214 and CA Bayly, 'Returning the British to South Asian History: The Limits of Colonial Hegemony', *South Asia*, Vol 17, No 2, 1994, pp 1-25.

Chapter 4

THE AMBIGUOUS DISCOURSE OF UPPER CASTE CHRISTIANITY

By the second half of the nineteenth century, Protestantism had made deep inroads into Tamil society; this was the period that saw the beginning of 'corporate' or mass conversions of lower castes to Christianity. In this chapter I will analyse how conversion figured in the imagination of different sections of upper caste Tamil society. I will argue that missionary attitudes towards conversion have to be problematised and seen as highly personal expressions of individuals who were deeply influenced by their ideological world, pressure from the Government and the public and the everyday situations faced on fieldwork. In an atmosphere rife with debate on the question of the impact of Christianity on 'traditional' society, I will also suggest that for many upper castes Christians the 'upliftment' of the downtrodden co-existed with an acceptance of the values the caste system represented. How was their defence of 'tradition' different from that of upper caste Hindus? For all these voices, the lowly Paraiyar became a symbol, appropriated by different sections of society to argue their positions and to articulate their worldviews.

The Missionary and the Paraiyar

A Tamil handbill from the 1870s was to declare, ' Friends! A person who indulges in lies, theft, prostitution and anger belongs to the lower castes. A person who believes in love, obedience, peace and generosity is of high caste. If you

believe in Jesus Christ, He will give you all these good qualities and you will have a good next birth'¹

Lying amongst a large number of pamphlets and handbills in the United Theological College Archive on the evils of idolatry, superstition and caste was this piece of missionary propaganda.² Although startling to the reader at first, the missionary author of this handbill revealed, in fact, the feelings of many of his colleagues in South India. Many missionaries combined pity and compassion for communities like the Paraiyars with a complete acceptance of the values of a hierarchical caste system. Thus sins like theft and lust were committed by the lower castes alone; a virtuous character being a high caste quality. It was by being Christian, by conversion that the Paraiyar could attain the character of, and eventually be an upper caste man. The author makes it clear that this was a promise that could only be fulfilled in the convert's next birth, since no one, not even Christ could erase the permanence of status that birth conferred on a man. In light of the fact that Protestant missions were known for the hard stance they took against the hierarchy of caste how can one explain the contents of this handbill?

1. മനളി ലേഖനം കടന്നുപോയി, 'Caste Refuted', Handbill No. 126, Printed for the South Travancore Tract and Book Society, Nagarcoil, May 1879.

2. See assorted tracts, pamphlets and handbills in the United Theological College Archive. Their subject matter is invariably didactic, in the form of warnings and advice to follow the Christian way of life. The commonest include titles like 'The Sin of Idol Worship', 'Evils of Caste' or 'Incarnate Grace' which exhibits the falsehood of Vishnu's avatars. These represented an attack on 'Hinduism' and the practices associated with it. However there are also occasional references to the reprehensible nature of the Tamil way of life. 'Evils of Comedies' for instance, denounces the enactment of village plays and 'Evils of the tongue' declares that lying is a chronic habit amongst Tamilians.

By the middle of the nineteenth century Protestant missions all over Madras Presidency had launched an all out attack on caste. In 1850, a decision was finally reached as far as the official position on caste was concerned. The Madras Missionary Conference, composed of missionaries of various denominations was to formulate what was probably the first interdenominational Protestant policy on caste. It declared that it was unequivocally opposed to the institution of caste, which was radically at variance with Christian principles and could not be tolerated in Churches. Caste was essentially a 'Hindu' concept and its retention by 'native converts' was an indication that the latter had not been able to cut off their ties from the evils of Heathenism. This break was all important; the convert had to see himself as a member of a new Christian community and the maintenance of links with caste Hindus would only serve to strengthen the tendency to apostasy.

However, it is important to note that in fact, the 1850 resolution came after a series of bitter struggles and disputes in the Church in the first half of the nineteenth century. Before 1860, missionary efforts had been directed towards individuals regardless of caste or had concentrated on the higher castes in the belief that the strategy of 'downward filtration' would eventually win them converts. Many missionaries had called for a lenient approach towards caste because they felt that a completely antagonistic attitude towards it would invariably lead to reversions to Hinduism and a numerical decline in the numbers of converts as the 'native' population would be unwilling to undergo the loss of economic and social status that a complete severing of caste ties would entail.

Churches were also allowed to be indigenised through the incorporation of local caste practices into Christian ritual. Hierarchical seating arrangements where Christians of a higher caste would sit on the right while those of the lower sat on the left side of the pulpit was a common occurrence. There is also evidence that the Holy bread and wine were given to different castes at different times.³ The incorporation of status conscious 'caste' practices was even a feature of lower caste congregations. A missionary present at the opening of a chapel in a low caste area was aghast that :

four of these castes who differed in life, habits, religion and other things as much as a crow does from a raven, had been gathered into the Christian fold, and in their primitive chapel, a mere shed without windows, doors or walls, and with a mud floor, had raised a mud wall of separation about six inches high to divide one wretched caste from another in their worship of the God who made them all of one blood. ⁴

A decision to declare war on caste was finally agreed on only because the Protestant missionaries, products of the evangelical ideology of individualism were ultimately convinced that the salvation and well being of each convert was more important than attracting numbers by being non-committal on the issue. Thus a missionary in charge of a Madras seminary was to complain in 1833 that :

a great obstacle to further success ... is the strong and un-Christian attachments which the native converts have to caste. This keeps them from sending their sons to be educated in the schools, lest

³ See G A Oddie, 'Protestant Missions, Caste and Social Change in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol 6, No 3, Year 1969, p. 261

⁴ Rev J Knowles, 'Rescue the Pariah' in *Harvest Field*, Sept 1880, pp 132 – 136.

they should eat with those of a lower grade, and thereby lose caste, which involves loss of distinction in their own community, and is attended with disgrace. That this feeling which rests entirely on a Heathen notion, should be introduced into a Christian Church, is much to be deplored; but it is so deeply seated in their minds that it seems that nothing less than the strenuous efforts of Missionaries, attended with the blessing of God can free them from this influence.⁵

It was ironical that many missionaries believed that the public declaration of a war on caste in 1850 would lose the Church many followers even if it ensured spiritual welfare of the individual convert. For in fact this move, combined with the formidable reputation that many missionaries has as champions of the underprivileged and oppressed, heralded a remarkable period of mass conversions of the lowest castes to Christianity⁶.

The attitude of many missionaries towards this somewhat unexpected development was ambiguous. As low caste Christians began to figure heavily in missionary reports, journals and correspondence, strikingly compassionate accounts of the wretched life that the outcastes of Madras had to face were mingled with a sceptical attitude about the strength of the faith of their lower caste congregations. It appeared to many missionaries that while low caste Hindus invited 'conquest' the hunt was so easy and the 'victim' so vulnerable that he could be accorded little value. For the Paraiyar in sharp contrast to the upper

⁵ Mr Blackburn's remarks on the 'Injurious Influence of caste', Church Missionary Record, March 1833, p. 40

⁶ For an analysis of Protestant Mission policy see Duncan Forrester, Caste and Christianity: Attitude and Policy on Caste of Anglo Saxon Missionaries in India, London, 1980.

castes, becoming Christian did not involve any kind of hardship or sacrifice. Conversion for the upper caste man meant 'severing at one stroke every thrilling tie of kinship: mother, father, sister, brother would henceforth be strangers, and the very ground he had cultivated would thrust him from his bosom and deny him the right to pursue the calling on which his livelihood depended.'⁷ On the other hand the Paraiyar faced no such trauma because as Rev Pratt commented, '... as a rule the convert is speedily followed by his parents, brothers and sisters, or as very often happens the whole family is received at one time without the risk and suffering involved in even temporary separation.'⁸ He was also he allowed to continue in his occupation completely unhindered; a scenario in sharp contrast to the lot of the upper caste convert for whom 'open confession of Christ was followed by loss of caste and degradation to the level of the loathed outcaste.'⁹ Could any suffering be more acute than to be reduced to the status of a Paraiyar?

For many missionaries therefore, the fact that upper castes had to pass through 'a fiery ordeal' meant that they represented a true change of heart and a true understanding of the truth of Christ. The missionary on the field often found it necessary to remind himself that 'there is in Christ neither bond nor free, neither Brahman nor Pariah.... and that the conversion of one thrills heaven with no higher joy than that of other.'¹⁰ His distress on the question of whether the

⁷ Rev B Pratt, 'A Plea for Mission Work Among Low Caste Hindus', *Harvest Field*, Sept 1890, p. 85

⁸ Ibid., p. 86

⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 82

Paraiyar represented the ideal convert was once again summed up by puzzled Rev Pratt who wondered 'What place would such a Church built up of such materials (Paraiyars) fill in the ultimate triumph of Christianity?'¹¹

Whatever the missionary's personal prejudices, he had to bow down to the pressure that public opinion in Britain as well as mission headquarters began to put on him, demanding that Churches in India show a strong numerical increase. A sorely tried Rev. Pratt was to comment in 1890 that '... a missionary, who would retain the sympathy of friends at home, must tell of scores and hundreds whom he has welcomed into the Church... Numbers are demanded, and unless returns be large and quickly realised the missionary's toils rank as failure...'¹² For the missionary, the Paraiyars were conspicuous by their numbers and the fact that they appeared eager to escape their life of thralldom. It was therefore:

but a counsel of common sense to make sure of the classes most accessible to us. The lower castes do not need to be sought out; they are around us everywhere. Our houses are filled with them and their houses are found at the gate of every village. Is it too much to urge that the conversion of a class, which thus invites conquest, should not have one of the very foremost places in our policy?¹³

Thus it is important to note that missionary perceptions and attitudes cannot be seen as monolithic and amongst the fiery critics of caste there were many missionaries for whom an ideal congregation would have been an upper

¹¹ Ibid., p. 87

¹² Ibid., p. 81

¹³ Ibid., p. 85

caste one - imbued as this group of people were with courage and the truth of the Christian gospel. They admired these men and imbibed many of their stereotypes about the lower castes. It only seemed natural to them that the way forward for their 'ignorant and illiterate' Paraiyar converts was to grant them the qualities that made up an upper caste man. Seen in this light the handbill that we attempted to study earlier becomes easier to understand as an expression of missionary ambiguity towards conversion.

The image of the outcaste in 'upper caste Christianity'

For many a Christian missionary, as we noted, an upper caste Christian convert represented a truly recognised the truth of the gospel, and radically changed his whole way of life, a change which transformed his worldview and was reflected in his behaviour. It appears however, that many of these converts were doubtful as to whether the truth of the Gospel included a negation of caste; certainly the insistence on separate churches, hierarchical pew arrangements or the refusal to take communion with the lower castes were common occurrences. In this section I will, through a reading of a selection from the private papers of a prominent upper caste Christian Tamil, Vedanayaka Shastriar, attempt to throw some light on caste and how it's relation to the Christian way of life was perceived by men and women like him. Shastriar represented both an ideology that was shared by many upper caste Christian converts as well as specific circumstances that pertained to his life as an individual. Once again, the Paraiyar was converted into a symbol, an icon representing the 'meanest cast'. The way he

was treated and the justification of that treatment by the upper castes became the yardstick by which they judged themselves as Christians.

Vedanayaka Shastriar was a second generation 'Brahman' Protestant Christian, his parents having been Roman Catholics who later in life turned Protestant. A poet at the court of the Tanjore Raja Sarfojee's court, Shastriar was a dedicated Christian writing extensively on Christian precepts as well as issues concerning 'native converts'. He was also no stranger to public debate and discussion; for instance he was one of the organisers of the public preaching at the Njana Sadr or the 'Annual meditation on the principal parts of the Holy Scripture' which took place in Tanjore every year.¹⁴

He was to find a new cause when Charles Rhenius of the Church Missionary Society arrived in Tirunelveli in 1820, and in Frykenberg's words turned radical conversion into social revolution; under him lower caste conversion spread like wildfire across the district. Rhenius spread his message through word and tract - the Native Bible and Tract Society was founded in 1822 and in 1831 printed and distributed 45,000 tracts. Missionaries held conversations and preached at street corners, fairs, festivals, market places and near temples. For the respectable and scholarly in Tirunelveli town, he held regular discussions

¹⁴ Circular Letter in Unidentified materials, Private Collection of Vedanayagam Shastriar marked VPC - VNS, United Theological College Archive, Bangalore. It appears that the Njana Sabha was held for forty five days during Lent each year and took place on such a grand scale that the list of expenses included payments to be made for a pandal, oil, candles, servants, washermen and clothes for children who were assisting those in charge of organisation.

and debates. Particularly close to Rhenius' heart was the negation of caste hierarchy and the notion that all Christians had to live as one.¹⁵

One of the important ways in which Rhenius hoped to increase contact between the castes was through the removal of taboos in connection with commensality. This question was argued with vigour by Shastriar who took deep umbrage at Rhenius' statement that 'Superiors, inferiors, rich, poor, masters and servants must receive communion without pride, shame or hatred.' This, claimed Shastriar, was nothing less than an insult to the caste Tamil and was reflective of Rhenius' secret desire 'to force us to mix with the Paria and eat with him', something that a high caste Christian would never do.¹⁶ The reason for this was not because the upper caste man despised the outcaste Paraiyar and was too proud to partake of the holy bread and wine, or indeed any meal with him- it was because of habit. Shastriar proceeded to draw a fascinating analogy :

Although we the Tamilians of this country eat mutton we will never eat Beef; by this do we love the Mutton and hate the Beef? It is not so. We are accustomed to do so but not otherwise. Even the pious man will feel aversion to eat Beef; it is not proceeded from pride. Accordingly as they are not accustomed to eat beef from the time immemorial they feel aversion to eat with Paria. It is loathsome to him.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Frykenberg, 'The Impact of conversion and social reform' pp 199-204

¹⁶ 'Answer to the Improper Words written by the late Revd Rhenius regarding the Lord's Supper', in Dialogue on Caste, Private Collection of Vedanayagam Shastriar, VPC – VNC, No 35, United Theological College, Bangalore.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Interestingly therefore what Shastriar was invoking was the importance of 'customary practice' in determining the behaviour of upper caste Christians. The issue of the tolerance and encouragement of 'custom' by the state was a bone of deep contention between missionaries and upper caste Hindus. The former were aghast at the Company's patronage of 'idolatry and superstition' while the latter's argument was that 'native' religious practices, many of which necessitated the performance of menial ritual services by castes like the Paraiyars were of long standing and could not be tampered with. Shastriar's reasoning extended to emphasising the importance of 'custom' to influencing lifestyle and habit - this was true of all men regardless of religion, caste or race. Thus the Muslim would not eat pork; a Paraiyar would not eat in the house of a Pallar - not out of hatred or pride but because all these would not constitute habitual behaviour. Neither were the Europeans superior Christians because they did not object to eating with the Paraiyar - as Shastriar pointed out, '...just as you feel no aversion to eat beef according to the usage of your country, you eat the meal eat the meal dressed by Paria; can you say that you do so either from Piety or brotherly love? No.' It was far better to disregard the missionary call to do away with caste in church than to 'receive communion promiscuously with Paria' out of fear of the missionaries because this did not indicate 'true love or faith' and 'whatsoever is not of faith is sin'.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid.

In fact Christianity for Shastriar had little or nothing to do with egalitarianism. A priest's duty for example was 'to preach Christ' not to force a man who does not eat pork 'to eat pig or mix and eat with him who eat pig.'¹⁹ Rhenius had misunderstood the true nature of the Christian faith and because the latter had the power of the printing press behind him, he was spreading the calumny of the un - Christian behaviour of the upper castes through, in Shastriar's words 'your books which you publish against us incessantly'. The text of these 'invectives' were designed to hurt the sentiments of men like Shastriar - 'it is written that the pride of false Christians who pretend that they are high castes should be reduced', 'that you bear upon your head the idol that is caste distinction', 'that caste is Satan' or that 'Christ is a Paria'²⁰

This to Shastriar was nothing less than a misreading of the scriptures, a fact that was borne out by the history of Christianity. Radical Protestantism based as it was on this kind of misunderstanding could not be accepted as the true faith. With a Roman Catholic background and with experience of having worked in Tanjore with Shwartz it was likely that he was influenced by a notion of an ideology that accepted status quo as far as societal hierarchy was concerned and saw it's duty as lying in the spiritual welfare of it's flock. This would certainly have had the support of the propertied upper castes who felt threatened by the new demands of the usually subordinate in society; an important example being

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 'Text of the invective words' in Dialogue on Caste, Private Papers of Vedanayagam Shastriar, VPC - VNC, No 35, United Theological College, Bangalore.

low caste agricultural labourers demanding their rights from their landlord masters. It was said that previously:

Pariar who embraced Christianity loved as their masters and behaved themselves as father and son; but they neither hated each other nor considered themselves at variance according to the manner in which the former missionaries treated them from the late Venerable Ziegenbalg to Father Swartz.....But now for the space of thirty years that is from the time of Reverend Rhenius, dissension bitterly arose...for he sees and hears with pleasure all their (the Paraiyars') advice and encourages them with too much indulgence.²¹

A product of his social strata, Shastriar reflected the interests and values of the upper castes. He did not just advocate heirarchised Christianity, he saw the caste system as being an integral part of the faith. Even as the Protestant mission stood at the helm of an awe inspiring machinery that would spread the Christian knowledge through tract and public preaching throughout the districts of Madras Presidency, Shastriar was unimpressed. He was very much the Brahman, with a traditional monopoly of knowledge and the truth to him was different as well as absolute - the low caste convert could never be equal to the high caste one; he could never occupy a central position in the Christian world - on no account could Christ be a Paraiyar.

²¹ 'Reasons adduced that the scriptural passages quoted by the Revd recent missionaries in support of their new system on castes are not literally adapted to it' in Dialogue on Caste, Private Papers of Vedanayagam Shastriar, VPC – VNC, No 35, United Theological College, Bangalore.

The rhetoric of 'custom'

Many upper castes Hindus, particularly in districts where missionary activity was particularly intense soon began to feel threatened by the spread of Christianity. In this section I will focus on the landlords of Tirunelveli area, who faced with certain cases of absconding Christian slaves were struck by the fear of complete loss of labour. As conversion began to increase the debate over 'custom' became a part of the conflict between missionaries, the upper castes and the Government. I will now examine how it was invoked in a series of upper caste landlord petitions sent to the Government in the 1820s.²²

In 1827, the Collector of Tirunelveli, James Munro caused an uproar amongst the 'principal inhabitants' of the district by passing an order prohibiting the use of 'compulsory means' to ensure the attendance of lower caste persons at temple festivals for the purpose of drawing the raths or cars in which the temple's deities were carried. The usual practice had been for the government to issue a circular letter to the Tahsildars of each taluq on these occasions directing them to compel the low caste labourers in their areas to perform this menial ritual service. Munro claimed that the men required to perform this service were, unsurprisingly, extremely reluctant to do so. In his opinion this was because no adequate compensation was ever made to the persons employed nor were

²² Historians have generally emphasised the importance of the 1840s when Tirunelveli became the scene of violent clashes between Hindus and Christians, sometimes involving upper caste anti Christian societies like the Sacred Ash Society or Vibhuti Sangam. These were supported by anti missionary societies like the Sadur Veda Siddhanta Sabha or the Salay Street society in Madras where educated upper castes were eventually to form the 'Madras Hindu Community' for the purpose of political agitation about their religious fears. See Frykenberg, 'The impact of conversion and social reform' pp 204 - 210

exemptions granted from their usual duties on the fields of their masters.²³ The government however, did not share Munro's view; faced with protests from the upper castes it asked him to revoke his order.²⁴

As a result of this ban over two hundred persons representing 'the officers of Pagodas, heads of Madams, Merchants and others' sent a petition to James Munro.²⁵ It claimed that:

from the days of the kings of the race of Manu until the month of March 1825 the persons who discharged the offices of bearing the idols, carrying the torches and other things, dragging the cars during the great festivals of the pagodas, were summoned by an order from the officers of government and the festivals went on properly. Since the month of April 1825, among your honour's orders to the Tahsildars one has been given in opposition to the ancient usage by which the Tahsildars and the government officers under them with the peons are forbidden to interfere in the affairs of the pagodas, in consequence of this the cars ...which are very large, were not set in motion and the festivals were at a stand. The principal inhabitants.... not the proper persons to perform the business above mentioned, being unwilling that such important

²³ What Munro did not mention and was equally true was that the drawing of temple raths often proved to be extremely dangerous, sometimes fatal. For one thing the draggers were flogged and accidents under the wheels of the raths were common.

²⁴ 'Letter from the Collector of Tinnevely to the Chief Secretary of Government, Fort St George' Rev Cons, Vol 322, 5 Jan, 1827, Tamilnadu State Archives.

²⁵ This list could indicate that the petitioners wished to convey that different sections of Hindu society, both religious- temple officials and heads of religious orders as well as secular-merchants were united on this issue. It is equally possible that they wanted to project the notion of a consensus amongst Hindu religious leadership. As we have seen in the last chapter prominent merchants were often the heads of the Right and Left Hand caste collectivities.

festivals should be discontinued did unite together and drag the cars but the pomp of the procession suffered much diminution²⁶

A reading of the text of this petition reveals how the servility of the lower castes was woven into an upper caste historical narrative.²⁷ The notion of a particular activity having existed 'since the days of Manu' was a cliché that was often used in petitions to establish a practice as long established custom, the disruption of which could only prove troublesome for the Tamil country's new rulers. Thus the same petitioners in a representation to the government were to declare that:

the pagodas were founded by prophetic sages.... by the abundant favour of the deity that the people might worship him; that their ignorance might be removed and their condition improved; that their numbers might be multiplied; that the rains might fall in their seasons, and the crops increase; and the government's share might be augmented.²⁸

The rulers of the Tamil country had always been aware that peace and prosperity depended on the smooth functioning of the cycle described by the

²⁶ 'Translation of a letter to James Munro, Collector of Tinnevely' Rev Cons, Vol 322, 5 Jan, 1827, Tamilnadu State Archives.

²⁷ Interestingly, Thurston remarks that the pulling of the cars of the idols was a privilege that the Paraiyars possessed as a survival from a past in which they held a much higher position in society. There are few indications that this a popular notion at this time- even if the lower castes believed this was true, the difficulties that had to be borne by the performance of this function seemed to have far outweighed the value of the practice as a symbol of past glory. On their part, the upper castes certainly did not believe in a world where the Paraiyars as respected members of society were granted this role as special recognition of their status in society. As we shall see the story they would tell was quite different. See Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, Vol 7, pp 83-84.

²⁸ Translation of a letter to the Governor of Madras, Rev Cons., Vol 322, 5 Jan, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

petitioners - thus governments from the 'earliest ages to till the time of the Coronation government' upheld the custom of forcibly summoning the persons who would drag the raths during temple festivals and thereby keep the deity happy. This was true even 'when the reign of the Nawab of Wallajah arrived; notwithstanding he was of another religion he...conducted everything as it had been.' ²⁹ Other than playing upon the almost pathological preoccupation that the Company had with increasing revenue, these words were calculated to evoke amongst the British, a feeling of being alien rulers who needed to preserve 'tradition' in order to maintain peace and prosperity in their realm.

In fact the government's policy of non-interference in local customs was constantly invoked to make the petitioners' case:

Upon the assumption of the government by the Honourable Company, Mr Lushington the first person who came to collect the revenues of this district, in a proclamation that he issued for the information of the inhabitants, set forth that they might rest assured that the Honourable English government would cause strict justice to be observed as long as the sun and moon should endure according to the established usage, not in the least infringing upon their customs respecting religion or the system of castes , nor upon their privileges and various rights. Agreeably to this proclamation of 1802 made by the government, the Collector above said has acted without making the slightest alteration in the "circumstance" of the ceremonies at the Pagodas, the festivals, the

²⁹ 'Translation of a letter to the Governor of Madras', Rev Cons, Vol 322, 5 Jan, Tamilnadu State Archives.

dragging cars or the observations of the religious customs of the people.³⁰

The problem therefore was of the making of the present Collector Munro, who disregarding precedent 'gave an order in direct opposition to the established custom...'

Protestant missionaries were strong critics of the government's policy of tolerance towards 'local custom'. A missionary report of a Hindu festival in 1840 was to lament that:

if the natives were only supported by custom in their superstition, custom would soon give way before gospel truth. There is a difficulty...hardest to surmount viz. the argument with which a Christian government supplies the natives to oppose to the Christian minister- "Your government supports our system, which you say, is wrong. Which of you is right, you or your government?"³¹

What disturbed the missions in particular was the active part that the state was willing to play in providing patronage to indigenous religious practices. Missionary journals comment bitterly on the fact that the Company went out of its way to provide both physical and material assistance to 'native' ceremonies and customs. A Rev Rogers, touring Madras was aghast to find that it was the Company which paid for the oil which lit the lamps in the temples of the city;³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ 'Further Proof of the Support given by the Local Government to Idolatrous Rites', Extract from the Journals of Rev F Rogers, *Church Missionary Record*, Madras, 1840, p. 200

³² 'Idolatry supported by the Indian Government', Extract from the Journals of the Rev F Rogers, *Church Missionary Record*, Madras, 1840, pp 197-198

equally astonished was a missionary who found that the 'native merchants' of Madras intended to apply to the government to ask the Collectors of various districts to assist the procession of Hindu holy men through their areas.³³ Lamented Rev. Rogers 'the plain inference was that the Company would not do so if their system was as erroneous and evil as we represented it to be! How long will the enlightened and Christian people of England allow such a state of things to continue?'³⁴

Indeed a great deal of the ire of the upper castes was directed against missionary propaganda which aimed at the undermining of the caste system and a disruption of the societal role that each caste had to play in an ideal Hindu order. The petitioners in 1827 lived in a multifaith society but they expressed the opinion that the heads of each group had restricted their jurisdiction to their own people :

from the earliest times there have been many religions and various systems of castes. To give religious instruction is indeed the usage of the leaders of each religious system respectively - the Brahman sannyasi, the Jin, the pandarams, the cazis but these several people instruct people of their respecting persuasions.... Now instead of

³³ 'Madras Superstition favoured by the Indian Government', Extract from the Journals of the Rev J H Elouis, *Church Missionary Record*, Madras 1840, pp196-197

³⁴ 'Idolatry supported by the Indian Government' Extract from the Journals of Rev F Rogers, *Church Missionary Record*, Madras, 1840, pp 196 – 197.

this in order that persons of one religion should be converted to another...³⁵

Print culture in the form of handbills, tracts, pamphlets and cheap Bibles as well as public preaching and reading during fairs and festivals, in market places and in the streets and fields meant that the dissemination of Christian knowledge to all sections of 'native society' became a feature of life in Tirunelveli. The zealousness of this propoganda, particularly in the Tirunelveli of the 1820s and 1830s under the aegis of Rhenius, frightened many of the upper castes. They needed constant reassurance that the missionaries were not supported by the state particularly because they felt that the Company's name was invoked under false pretences by former. Thus the 1827 petition was to comment that:

Mr Rhenius...disregarding Justice places men in the public roads, to call the persons who pass among them, and speaking ill of their systems of religion, and reprobating their several gods, he exhorts them to go over to the Christian religion, saying that if they will he will lower their Government rents and will moreover procure for them the countenance of those under authority.'

However it was the Protestant mission's use of the printing press that caused the most anxiety as well as affront. It was essential to prevent the 'mean cast people' from being taken in by Christian propoganda and the 'myth' of state

³⁵ 'Translation of a letter to the Giovernor of Madras', Rev Cons, Vol322, 5 Jan 1827, Tamilnadu State Archives.

patronage. An 1828 petition from the inhabitants of Tirunelveli was to complain that:

European missionaries sent Teachers to the Villages, and by means of the books which they have newly and Cunningly made and printed, and their exercising various contrivances people such as Pillies, Parias, Shanars and who were as slaves under the Inhabitants, thinking that the Honourable Company had come in the character of missionaries became bold and turned to the religion of Christ.³⁶

The upper caste Hindu's invocation of 'custom' to preserve his own position in society was, as we have seen above remarkably similar to Vedanayaka Shastriar's views. Their critiques of the methods used by the missionaries also echoed each other - in particular, the 1827 petition's disapproval of the way the written word was used by as a propaganda too is strangely reminiscent of Shastriar's condemnation of the print literature of the 'new missionaries.' In both instances, therefore the Paraiyar became a victim of an upper caste past. As in the case of the Christian missionaries, it would inaccurate to see the cases I have considered as the general rule. Many missionaries, Rhenius for example expressed a strong antagonism towards the hierarchical values of the caste system and the upper castes who continued to uphold them. Similarly, missionary journals and letters contain long accounts of upper caste converts committed to

³⁶ 'The humble petition of the undersigned Inhabitants of Tinnevely', Rev Cons, 2 Aug, 1828, Tamilnadu State Archives.

the task of eradicating caste.³⁷ My intention is merely to suggest that these attitudes cannot be seen as homogeneous. There is evidence, that for many privileged Christians, the discourse of Christianity was indeed ambiguous.

³⁷ For a detailed account of prominent missionaries in South India, see Antony Copley, *Religions in Conflict*, pp 141 – 173

CONCLUSION

Historians have not sufficiently explored the century or so preceding the 1840s, the period in which the genesis of 'modern' Tamil consciousness is usually located. The emergence of informed 'political communities' at this time is linked to the proliferation of print, the growth of public opinion and 'native' associations. The political awakening of the lowest castes, the 'untouchables', frequently seen as the offshoots of the Non Brahman or lower caste movements is also located here. In this study of the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu, I have tried to suggest that an earlier period, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was crucial to the transformation and reconstitution of Paraiyar identity.

My main focus has been on the encounter and negotiation of the Paraiyars with the dynamics of everyday life in the city of Madras, marked by the imprint of the political and social culture of the day. Archival evidence is witness to the involvement of the Paraiyars in a variety of urban debates and issues that ranged from land disputes, the nomination of caste head men, the functioning of markets and festivals as well the negotiation over custom which centered around spaces like the Paracheri, the Church, military encampments and the 'traditional' Left Hand and Right Hand disputes of the period. What is also noticed is the widespread use of modes of social communication by the Paraiyars, which ranged from the palm leaf document or the olai to the letter and petition.

This notion of 'community' is however a complicated one. There was no transition or shift from a vertical solidarity to a horizontal one; the Paraiyar's identity was capable of appearing fissured and collective at the same time. Thus

if Paracheri petitions appear to point to some kind of consciousness of self as urban labourers with 'political' demands, there was equally, an insistence on recognition as members of the hierarchical Right Hand collectivity. The importance of according agency to the Paraiyar becomes crucial to our understanding of this phenomenon. The Paraiyar identity was a product of his appropriation of the world around him and conditioned by his experiences and his past.

An exploration of Paraiyar identity allows us to critique certain a priori assumptions about lower caste conversion. In the first place my emphasis has been on the role of Catholic mobilisation which has often been neglected in favour of the more radical anti caste movements of the Protestants. This is a historiographical oversight not least because cities like Madras appear to have had a strong lower caste Catholic presence from a very early period. In our study of two urban Church disputes appears that Catholicism in spite of its moderate stand on caste had imparted a very strong Christian identity to the Paraiyars. At the same time it appears that Paraiyar's understanding of the truth of the Gospel saw the boundaries between 'Heathen' and Christian Paraiyars as extremely ambiguous both in terms of religious practices and issues like the nomination of caste heads.

If an understanding of lower caste conversion in terms of an ideology of social resistance or entry into a new 'modernised' order is problematic, so is the assumption of monolithic attitudes towards caste of upper caste Christians and missionaries. We have seen that both these groups were products of their social milieu and ideological world. Many missionaries had grave misgivings about

lower caste conversion and continued to believe that the ideal convert was the upper caste man. 'Native' upper caste Christians were also often very ambiguous about the caste issue and like their Hindu counterparts used the rhetoric of custom in their attempts to preserve status quo.

Certain problems remain. My focus on the urban world, means of course that I am neglecting the very large numbers of Paraiyars who continued to live and work in the countryside. I have however tried, to the extent possible, to explore the links between the urban and rural worlds and examine how the Paraiyars' rural past helped shape his identity. Where can one locate sites for the formation and expression of identity in the rural context? Is there an alternative to the study of folklore or 'uprising'? Further my work lacks a gendered perspective - the Paraiyar identity I am focussing on is a masculine one. These gaps and problems have to answered by greater research into early modern Tamil Nadu.

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