

THE ORIGIN OF CASTE AMONG THE TAMILS

• BY

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The Origin of Caste among the Tamils.

The Tamil people in general believe that the caste system, which is holding them in firm grip from time immemorial, is an original inheritance of their race and that, as such, it is a sacred thing to be guarded religiously. A little inquiry into the history of its origin, however, will dissipate this false belief and help them to rise above a state of things which most people feel is a terrible incubus on a progressive generation.

Since of late there have been several writers on the subject of caste among the Tamils. But much confusion has been caused by their failing to distinguish carefully between Aryan social institutions and purely Tamilian ones. Obviously, we have nothing to do here with the old-fashioned, narrow-viewed *pundits* who gravely assert that the Tamils are of Aryan origin. Everyone, even superficially conversant with modern scientific literature on comparative philology and kindred subjects, knows that the Aryans and the Tamilians (or Dravidians, as they are less correctly called) form two distinct stocks. The Prakrit languages—that is to say, languages akin to Sanskrit—have nothing in common with Tamilian languages. They form two entirely different families. As in language, so in social habits and customs, the two peoples were once wide apart; and if we would form a just idea of the original condition of the Tamils, we should carry our investigations into those ancient times when they were a people by themselves and had not yet undergone the

foreign influences which their contact with the Aryans brought about in a later period.

But what are our historical data for determining the question of caste among the Tamils of such a remote period? Do we possess any written record of that hoary past? We possess indeed extremely old documents—the so-called Sangam Tamil literature—but they are certainly posterior to the fusion of the two peoples as a result of the gradual colonisation of Tamilakam (Tamil land) by the Aryans. Still, by the many allusions made in them to ancient Tamilian customs, and by many a side-light thrown by avowedly Aryanising writers themselves, we are enabled to get a glimpse of the real condition of pre-Aryan Tamilian society.

EARLY TAMILIAN SOCIETY.

If anything is clear from an examination of the ancient Tamil writings we possess, it is that the Tamilians, at a time when Aryan influence was least felt and when they were one undivided people, that is, before the Telugu, Malayalam, Tulu and Canarese offshoots had separated from the common parent-stock, knew nothing of the caste system of later days. The only class distinction they knew of was with regard to the parts of the country the different clans of the same race happened to occupy. A parallel instance in our own times is the distinction we sometimes make between rural people, islanders and town-folks. Ancient Tamilakam included four such distinctive regions: pasturable tracts, hill country, cultivated tracts and the sea-board—called in Tamil respectively *Mullai*, *Kurinchi*, *Marutam* and *Neital*. (*Tolkappiyam*, III. 5) To these, the desert tract (*Palai*) was also often added as forming a distinct region. Now, just as we would in our

days call a rustic, Nāddān, a townsman, Paddanattān and an islander, Teevān, the ancient Tamils called the dwellers of the five abovementioned tracts Ayan, Kuravan, Ulavan, Paravan and Maravan respectively. These appellations merely derived their origin from the tracts of country occupied, or avocations followed, by the different sections of the same people. They did not signify any ethnological differentiation or even any stereotyped social distinction.

In fact, although the callings, practices and usages of the peoples of the different regions were varied, there was no barrier for a man of one tract settling in and intermingling with the people of another territory. The chieftains of Maruta lands often wedded the daughters of Kurinchi, who are said to have been extremely beautiful, and also contracted marriages with those of Neital. (*Sentamil* VII. 28). The practice of giving away their daughters to heroes who succeeded in subduing "the ferocious bull" was prevalent among the Mullai clans, while free love and courtship before marriage was the general practice among all classes of Tamils. (*Ibid*). As a classical instance of this freedom from the exclusiveness engendered by caste feeling, the story of Jivakan, who travelled about and married wives in the different parts of the land, may be given. (See *Jivaka Chintamani*).

Nor was there any class of people kept at a distance as "untouchables". Even the aborigines of South India, such as Panar, Tudiār, Kadambar and Paraiyar, who seem to have been a race distinct from the Tamil Vellalar—a later-day ruling class,—were not excluded from their society. The Sangam works bear ample testimony to the fact that Tamilian chieftains dined with Panar; and that the other aboriginal tribes invariably found themselves

quite at home wherever they went. There was moreover no discrimination of clean and unclean food, flesh-meat having been indulged in by high and low as any other article of food. Nor do we find slaves mentioned anywhere. For references see *The Tamils 1800 Years Ago*; *The Tamils, their Early History and Religion*, and *A History of Hindu Vegetarianism*.

It is true that in early Tamilian society, as is the case among all civilized peoples, we find the distinction of higher, lower and middle classes, called *Mutalykal*, *Kadaiyar* and *Idaiyar* respectively; but it must be borne in mind that these were no more than fluctuating conditions of life among the people. Such social distinctions had not yet crystallised into congenial and almost specific distinctions at the time we are now considering. The fictitious specific distinction established between clan and clan, and the curious ideas of caste-pollution and rebirth, were in no way indigenous products of Tamilakam but have been doubtless imported from the North by the Brahmins. Let us, therefore, briefly trace the origin and development of the caste system among the Aryans, for discovering how and at what period of their history the Tamils came under its sway.

THE TOLKAPPIYAM AND TAMILIAN CASTES.

Before proceeding to examine the Aryan caste system, however, it may be well to dispose of the false idea of some who suppose that the *Tolkappiyam*, an ancient work on the grammar and sociology of the Tamils, was earlier than the Aryan colonisation of South India, and that, since it represents them as having been divided into the four Aryan Varnas or castes, they too have had their caste-system from the earliest times. This view is due to the

fact that its partisans consider the *Tolkappiyam* as a work entirely independent of Sanskrit influences; but that this is not the case is shewn, in the first place, by the very introduction (Chirappo-payiram) to the great work, in which Panamparanar declares that it was based on Aindra Vyakarana, an earlier Sanskrit grammar. There is no doubt that the *Tolkappiyam* is modelled on Sanskrit lines, although the genius of the language has been carefully conserved. This is especially true of the third part (*Porul-atikaram*) which, though similar in general outline to Sanskrit treatises on rhetoric and prosody, contains nevertheless much that is purely Tamilian in concept and development.

The traditional assertion that Tolkappiyar was a disciple of Agastya, the father of the Tamil language, and that he based his work on his master's *Agastyam* also corroborates this. (See Editorial preface by C. W. Tamotarampillai to the *Porul-atikaram*). The myth of Agastya being the father of the Tamil language probably means that he was the first to introduce a grammatical system for it, founded on a Sanskrit prototype. His system was, in all likelihood, an adaptation from the Rig Veda Pratisakhya or from some Sanskrit school of grammarians. (See *Tamilian Antiquary*, V. 8). The age of Agastya marks in fact the height of Aryan influences in the South. It was then that "Northern religions and social institutions were introduced and the Brahminical priesthood and in its train the Buddhists, the Nigranthas, the Ajwakas and other religious sects began to pour upon the South... It was then that literature exclusively Dravidian was replaced by Northern traditions and legends. The national literature was slowly modified, its legends transformed, its heroes amalgamated with or lost in the

personality of those of the North and its gods absorbed with a change of name into the Aryan pantheon." (*Tam. Antiq.* V. p. 8). On the face of these facts it would be preposterous indeed to hold that the *Tolkappiyam* represents the state of the Tamil society antecedent to the Aryanising of the South.

Nay more; there is ample evidence from this work itself that when it was written the Tamils had been Aryanised to a considerable extent. We need not remark upon the very name of the work which is most probably a hybrid composed of *Tol* (Tamil) and *Kappiyam* for *Kavya* (Sanskrit), notwithstanding the ingenious effort of Mr. Ponnampalapillai in his Memorial to the Maharajah of Baroda to show that the compound is made up of *Tol*, *Kappo*, and *Iyam*. This veteran scholar has paused to reflect that ancient writers call the author of the work *Kappiyakudian* and hence the word should not be split as he does. In the Rig Veda the name *Kavya* is applied to Sukra, and it is likely that an old Brahmin clan went by that name. At any rate, all traditional accounts converge towards the assumption that *Tolkappiyam* was an Aryan Brahmin, and no wonder, therefore, we find him using Sanskrit side by side with Tamil words. It must be observed, however, that he introduces Sanskrit words very sparingly, preferring always to employ Tamil forms wherever possible, and even to coin new words when necessary.

Not only are Sanskrit words used as current among Tamils, but the Brahminical scriptures, gods, and institutions are also referred to in familiar terms. Thus the Vedic writings are mentioned in III. 31; the *Samskaras* connected with the Vedic fire-worship and the different forms of Shastric asceticism are referred to in III. 75; Vedic gods in III. 5; "the eight forms of marriage prevalent in

the land of Brahmins" in III. 92; Aryan marriage ceremonies in III. 145; and according to Sabaratna Mudaliyar, from whom (*Hindu Orgān* 11-5-16) we are taking most of these references, "the Vedanta Maha Vakya of *Tatwamasi* is itself referred to in *Tolkappiyam*"—a fact, by the way, which shows that the work is later than the Vedanta sect and therefore not 4000 years old (the Editor of the work places it 12000 years ago!) as the Mudaliyar repeatedly affirms.

"The whole of the section known as *Porul-atikaram* of this great work," to quote the same writer, "breathes a Vedic spirit, and it is useless to multiply quotations in support of the veneration the Tamils had for the Vedas." *Ergo* the *Tolkappiyam* points to a time when Vedic institutions had been fully reproduced among the Tamils—this is the legitimate conclusion. But the Mudaliyar, by a strange distortion of the reasoning faculty, concludes from this that the religion of the Tamils in pre-Aryan times was purely Vedic and that the *Tolkappiyam* was written before the Tamils came in contact with the Aryans!

But we have seen above that this work was without doubt written when the Aryanising of South India was a *fait accompli*. Hence, the argument drawn from its mentioning Aryan castes as existing among the Tamils is absolutely of no value. When carefully studied, this ancient grammar rather appears to be the first written attempt to foist the caste system of the Aryans on the Tamils. The author of *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* describes this as follows: "In the earliest Tamil grammar extant, which was composed by a Brahmin named *Tolkappiyam* in the first or second century B.C., frequent allusions are made to the Arivar or sages (III. 75, 193, 503, 510). But, in the chapter in which he describes

the classes of society, the author omits all mention of the Arivar and places the Brahmins who wear the sacred thread as the first caste (III. Marapiyal). The kings, he says very guardedly, and not warriors, form the second caste, as if the three kings Chera, Chola and Pandya could form a caste; all who live by trade belong to the third caste. He does not say that either the kings or the merchants wear the sacred thread. Then he singles out the Vellalas and states that they have no other calling than the cultivation of the soil. He does not say that the Vellalas are Sudras but indirectly implies that the ordinary Vellalas should be reckoned as Sudras, and that those Vellalas who were kings should be honoured as Kshatriyas. This is the first attempt made by the Brahmins to bring the Tamils under their caste system. But in the absence of the Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra castes in Tamilakam, they could not possibly succeed; and to this day the Vellala does not take meals or drink water at the house of a Padaiyadchi who calls himself a Kshatriya or of a merchant who passes for a Vaisya. Tolkappiyan alludes also, in his grammar, to the Ayar and Veddavar, or the shepherds and huntsmen, but in the chapter on castes, he makes no mention either of them or of the Maravar, Valaiyar, Pulaiyar, and other classes, as he could not do it without being inconsistent with the Brahminical division of castes" (p. 116).

In the above extract the author says that the Brahmins did not succeed in introducing their caste system among the Tamils. We rather think they have succeeded admirably at least with those Vellalas who claim the caste system as an institution based "on the instinctive difference of human nature" "by a law of Divine dispensation," forgetting the while that in the name of this fanci-

ful law the Aryan Smritis make them all Sudras, that is, exclude them from all religious instruction and practice (Manu X. 126, IV. 80, 81) and bring them down to the level of brutes. (Manu XI. 132). Professor Sundarampillai made the following sensible remarks on this class of people: "The Vellalas who form the flower of the Dravidian race have now so far forgotten their nationality as to habitually think and speak of themselves as 'Sudras'—and even more stupidly as Vaisyas. In fact, to tell them that they are no more Sudras than Frenchmen and that the Aryan polity of castes was the cunningly forged fetters by which their earliest enemies—the Aryans of the North—bound their souls, which is worse than binding hands and feet, might sound too revolutionary a theory, though historically but a bare fact." And Mr. Nallasvampillai adds: "Those of them (non-Aryans) who have learnt to call themselves Sudras—the wretched—consider it the acme of social elevation to be known as Vaisyas meaning simply the masses or the people at large." (Cited by Pundit Mr. S. Mailvaganam in *H. O.*, 27-11-16.)

THE ARYAN CASTE SYSTEM.

We may now turn to the study of caste among the Aryans who, we have seen, first introduced it among the Tamils along with so many other Brahminical institutions.

Was the caste system part and parcel of Aryan social life from the beginning? It does not seem so. If we may believe the writings of the post-Vedic period, we have evidence in them to show that in the first ages of the world (Krita yuga) there was no distinction of caste. The Vayu Purana (VIII. 62, 63) says: "There were no distinctions of castes or orders, and no mixture of castes... In the

Krita age they were born alike in form and duration of life, without any distinction of lower and higher." In the Ramayana (Uttra kanda, XXX. 19) Brahma is made to say to Indra: "O chief of immortals, all creatures were formed by my will of one Varna (colour or caste) with the same speech and uniform in every respect." The Mahabharata (Bhishmaparvan Jambunirm. 389) says the castes were produced only in the Dvapara yuga (the third age of the world); and, although mention of Kshatriyas and Brahmans is made in the previous yugas, they are shown as being equal among themselves in every way. The Ramayana (Uttara kanda; 74, 8) even seems to imply that only Brahmans existed in the first yuga. Other passages from the Puranas and Itihases, which declare Manu to have been the father of the human race, expressly affirm that men of all castes were descended from him. (See Muir: *Original Sanskrit Texts*, Vol. I, ch. II.) After citing a whole array of passages to this effect, Muir writes: "The series of passages just quoted is amply sufficient to prove, that according to the traditions received by the compilers of the ancient legendary history of India, (traditions so general and undisputed as to prevail over even their strong hierarchical prepossessions) Brahmans, Kshatriyas and even Vaisyas and Sudras, were, at least in many cases, originally descended from one and the same stock..... On the other hand, the possibility of this common origin of the different castes, though firmly based on tradition, appeared in later times so incredible or so unpalatable to some of the compilers of the Puranas, that we find them occasionally attempting to explain away the facts which they record by statements such as we have encountered in the case of the kings Rathitara and Bali, that their

progeny was begotten upon their wives by the sages Angiras and Dirghatamas or Dirghatapas; or by the introduction of a miraculous element into the story as we have already seen in one of the legends regarding Gritsamada and, as we shall have occasion to notice in a future chapter, in the account of Visvamitra." (Vol. II. 238.)

Setting aside the evidence of post-Vedic times, we have, in the Rig Veda, the great storehouse of information regarding the Indian Aryans of the earliest historical period, sufficient indications to ascertain the social condition of those days. That the caste system did not exist then is plain from the fact that the authors of the earlier hymns of the Rig Veda too regarded the whole of the Aryan nation, embracing not only the priests and chiefs but the mass of the people also, as descended from one common progenitor, Manu, whom also they considered as the first kindler of the sacrificial fire. See e.g. R. V. I. 80, 16; 114, 2; II. 33, 13; X. 100, 5; VIII. 19, 21; 34, 8 &c. The post-Vedic tradition about the human race descending from Manu, in fact, derived its origin from these accounts. Numerous references are found in this old record to a variety of ranks, classes and professions; but no hint is anywhere thrown out—except in a later hymn, the so-called Purusha Sukta (to be noticed presently)—about those classes being distinguished from one another by any original difference of race. "If," as Muir remarks, "the early Vedic Indians had all along believed in the quadruple production of their nation from the different members of Purusha, one might naturally have expected to find allusions to such a variety of birth running through the hymns"; but nothing of this kind is to be traced. Far from even hinting at the separate creation of

castes, the Rig Veda throughout, except in the single hymn alluded to above, states in unmistakeable terms that all men were created together as one race, although the act of generation is variously attributed by different poets to Agni, Soma, Indra and other gods. See R.V., I. 96, 2; IX. 86, 8; VIII. 85, 6; &c.

It is, again, true that in the Rig Vedic hymns (excluding always the Purusha Sukta) the word *Brahma* (masculine) or *Brahman*, which at first had the sense of sage, poet [i. e., compiler of *Brahma* (neuter) or prayer], as in I. 80, 1; 164, 34; VI. 47, 7 &c., and which afterwards designated an officiating priest (in this sense *brahman* also, i. e., son of a *brahma*) occurs in eight places and the word *Kshatriya*, in the sense of a person belonging to the royal family, in a few places such as X. 109, 3: while the words *Vaisya* and *Sudra* are not found at all, although *Vis*, from which the former is derived, is of frequent occurrence in the sense of 'people'. But in none of the hymns is there a reference to any recognised system of four castes. On the other hand, all the Aryan communities are often referred to as one people and there is even a distinct passage which speaks of the entire people as one *Varna*, not as three or four: *Hatvi dasyun pra Aryam Varnam avat* (R. V. III. 34, 9.)

We should, however, remark that in the later hymns of the Rig Veda a tendency of the various ranks of people towards hardening into hereditary classes is observable. This is but natural. The sacrificial functions of the Aryans, at first conducted by any gifted 'praying man' (*brahman*), developed into such a complicated thing as time went on, that different classes of professional priests skilled in the different parts of the worship by early instruction and practice became necessary. This naturally

paved the way to a hereditary class exclusively devoted to religious ministrations. Kings or nobles, too, became a class apart. The ascendancy the Brahmans enjoyed from the beginning as intermediaries between gods and men, as also counsellors of kings, was of course put to good use later on, and we have the post-Vedic caste system as its result. But even in later Vedic times, although the priesthood had become a profession, there is no evidence to shew (except in the Purusha Sukta once more) that the priests formed an exclusive caste separated from all others by insurmountable barriers as in post-Vedic times. "There is a wide difference between a profession or even a hereditary order and a caste in the fully developed Brahminical sense. Even in countries where the dignity and exclusive prerogatives of the priesthood are most fully recognised (as in Roman Catholic Europe), the clergy form only a profession, and their ranks may be recruited from all sections of the community. So too is it in most countries, even with a hereditary nobility. Plebeians may be ennobled at the will of the sovereign. There is, therefore, no difficulty in supposing that in the Vedic era the Indian priesthood—even if we suppose its members to have been for the most part sprung from priestly families, may have often admitted aspirants to the sacerdotal character from other classes of their countrymen." This extract is from Muir, and this patient compiler of the Original Sanskrit Texts quotes *in loco citato* a number of instances where, "according to ancient Indian tradition, persons not of priestly families were authors of Vedic hymns and exercised priestly functions" and in the following section gives "Texts from the Atanarva Veda illustrating the progress of Brahminical pretensions"—to which the reader is referred.

THE PURUSHA SUKTA.

Before concluding this section of our essay, a word on the fable which represents the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras as having been separately created from the head, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the Creator. This idea, which is entirely opposed to the tenor of the Rig Veda as already pointed out, is enshrined in its 90th hymn of the 10th book. It speaks of Purusha as the great sacrifice, and goes on to state: "The Brahman was his mouth; the Rajanya was made from his arms; the being called Vaisya, he was his thighs; the Sudra sprang from his feet." As Mr. Farquhar justly observes: "this is not caste yet, but it shows that men's minds were tending in the direction of caste and that the three classes were becoming more distinctly shut off from each other and from the aborigines. We have here the basis of caste, the religious sanction for it rather than the thing itself" (The Crown of Hinduism, p. 159). On the other hand, there can be no doubt that this hymn is one of the latest additions to the collection, and consequently what it says does not weaken the argument furnished by the rest of the hymns—that the caste system was unknown to the early Aryans. The following scholarly opinions will place the question beyond dispute:

"That remarkable hymn (the Purusha Sukta) is, in language, metre and style, very different from the rest of the prayers with which it is associated. It has a decidedly more modern tone, and must have been composed after the Sanskrit language had been refined and its grammar and system perfected"—(Colebrooke, *Miscellaneous Essays*, I. 300.)

"I have already observed that the hymn which we find in this collection (Rig Veda) are of very different

periods. This I believe is not disputed. The authors themselves, as we have seen, speak of newer and older hymns.... But if we are to recognise any difference of age, what hymns can we more reasonably suppose to be the oldest than those which are at once archaic in language and style and naive and simple in the character of their conceptions? And, on the other hand, what compositions can more properly be set down as the most recent than those which manifest an advance in speculative ideas while their language approaches to the modern[Sanskrit?]"
 —Muir (O.S.T. I. 13).

"The 90th hymn of the 10th book.....is modern both in its character and diction. It is full of allusions to the sacrificial ceremonials, it uses technical, philosophical terms, it mentions the three seasons in the order of Vasanta, spring; Grishma, summer; and Sarad, autumn; it contains the only passage in the Rig Veda where the four castes are enumerated. The evidence of language for the modern date of this composition is equally strong."
 —Max Muller, (*Anc. Sansk. Lit.*, 570.)

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CASTE-SYSTEM.

We said that in the later hymns of the Rig Veda a tendency of the various ranks of Aryan society towards hardening into hereditary classes is observable. This natural tendency indeed can account for the existence of distinct classes in it, but the idea of an impassable barrier between them,—in which the caste-system essentially consists,—is not explained by it. It is therefore incumbent on us to enquire how and when this idea originated among the Aryans.

There is no doubt that, in early post-Vedic times, too, no caste barrier existed between the various classes into

which society had naturally got itself divided. In the Brahminical legends of those times we find, for instance, the great Bharata's father, a Kshatriya, marrying a Brahmin lady. So, king Dushyanta married Sakuntala, daughter of a Brahmin, and Jamadagni of the celebrated family of Bhrigu had for his spouse the daughter of Prasenajit of the race of Takshaka or the Nagas. In fact, the Aryans entertained no scruples in those days in intermarrying with civilized aborigines themselves, as we find, in many instances, such as Vasudeva, father of Krishna, an Aryan, marrying Devaki of the race of Daityas or aborigines; the Brahmin Astika taking for wife a sister of the king of the Nagas; and Nala, king of the aboriginal tribe of Nishadas, espousing Damayanti, daughter of an Aryan king of Berar.

Even when the Brahmins had become a privileged class, their numbers continued to receive accessions from the other two classes—Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. This accounts partly for the great many varieties we find among the Brahmin families of later days. As for the Kshatriyas, it was a very common practice among them to take wives among foreign tribes almost by preference. This was due mostly to the adventures of war and the sort of life warriors led. The legendary life of Krishna and that of Arjuna give us some idea of how members of this class married wives and had children by them among every tribe they conquered or became friendly with. The exigencies of continued warfare against powerful odds also forced the Kshatriya chieftains to admit, time and again, many non-Aryan members into their ranks. This went on to such an extent that whole alien tribes had been gradually included among the Kshatriyas and incorporated in the Aryan nation when Brahmin law-givers found it im-

perative to devise measures to arrest the progress of a movement which was slowly denationalising the proud Aryan. Some such attempt is evidently reflected in Manu's otherwise meaningless story of the Pundrakas, Odras, Dravidas, Kambojas, Yavanas &c. having fallen from their original status of Kshatriyas to that of Sudras, by the non-observance of Aryan rites and the absence of Brahmins among them. (IX. 43, 44). This means very probably that these tribes, once admitted into their ranks by the Kshatriyas, were subsequently eliminated by legislation.

The Aryan caste system, indeed, seems to have been contrived by the Brahmins chiefly for securing the purity of their race. They very naturally put themselves as the premier class and safeguarded it against future contamination by ordaining, with a religious sanction, that no one who was not born such can become a Brahmin. They set down the Kshatriyas, already much defiled by coalition with so many foreign races, as a separate and inferior class; while the mass of the people (the *Vis* or Vaisyas) were declared still lower. And, to prevent intermarriage among these three classes, they decreed that the issues of such marriages became lower castes. This was so in a particular manner if a non-Aryan married an Aryan. The offspring of such a pair became an "Ayogava, a Kshattar and a Chandala the basest of men." "As a Sudra begets on a Brahmin an outcaste, so an outcaste begets a son more outcaste (than himself) by (women of) the four castes." (Manu, X. 12, 30). From these and similar enactments in the law-books of the post-Vedic Aryans it becomes clear that the invidious distinction of high and low classes, based not upon personal character or occupation but upon birth, and the idea that members of a

lower class can never attain to a higher class, were the result of positive legislation and were due to no other cause.

THE COLOUR BASIS.

In the difference of the colour (Varna) of various races, there was doubtless a natural basis for some sort of distinction. Thus the Mahabharata says: "The colour (Varna) of the Brahmins was white; that of the Kshatriyas red; that of the Vaisyas yellow, and that of the Sudras black." The Kathaka Brahmana, however, assigns white colour to the Vaisya and black to the Rajanya or Kshatriya—was it because the latter had mixed more with the aborigines? (In Muir: *O. S. T.* Vol. I, p. 140). But this accidental difference of colour did not constitute the specific distinction which the Brahminical caste-system sought to institute between the various classes and colours. The sequel to the passage of the Mahabharata quoted above illustrates this beautifully. "Bharadvaja here rejoins: 'if the caste of the four classes is distinguished by their colour, then a confusion of all castes is observable. Desire, anger, fear, cupidity, grief, apprehension, hunger, fatigue, prevail over us all; by what, then, is caste discriminated?...' Bhṛigu replies: 'There is no difference of castes: this world, having been at first created by Brahma entirely Brahmanic, became separated into castes in consequence of works. Those Brahmans who were fond of sensual pleasure, fiery, irascible, prone to violence, who had forsaken their duty and were red-limbed, fell into the condition of Kshatriyas. Those Brahmans who derived their livelihood from kine, who were yellow, who subsisted by agriculture and who neglected to practise their duties, entered into the state

of Vaisyas. Those Brahmans who were addicted to mischief and falsehood, who were covetous, who lived by all kinds of work, who were black and fallen from purity, sank into the condition of Sudras. Being separated from each other by these works, the Brahmans became divided into different castes. Duty and the rites of sacrifice have not been always forbidden to (any of) them. Such are the four classes for whom the Brahmanic Sarasvati was at first designed by Brahma, but who through their cupidity fell into ignorance '..." This passage which bears witness to the original oneness of the Aryan castes is remarkable ~~for~~ ascribing Aryan origin to the Sudras also. (As remarked by Professor Roth, the Sudras of the early times may well have been a branch of the Aryan stock conquered and subdued by the main body.) But the fact of the Aryans having in course of time fallen into four classes,—which this passage places before us in a mythological setting,—does not explain the congenital distinction we are discussing. That this was brought about by Brahminical legislation and in no other way, is fully borne out by the *Smritis* or law-books of the Aryans, as already remarked.

THE THEORY OF TRANSMIGRATION.

It is noteworthy that the theory of transmigration also became popular at about the same time as the inauguration of the caste system; and the legislators, we may well believe, utilised it for the furtherance of their object. Brahmins who married outside their caste were made members of a third and lower caste and certain religious privileges considered essential for salvation were refused them. Now, the question naturally presented itself: What means of salvation was open for those who were

excluded from Brahminical rites for breach of caste rules. The answer was furnished by the theory of transmigration. This theory supposed that the several grades in Hindu society were so many distinct stages in the scale of being which had been determined by the deeds of a past life and that each man is born into that caste for which his Karma has prepared him. If his former life has been spiritual he is born a Brahmin. If he was less advanced in spirituality he becomes a Kshatriya, Vaisya, and so on through lower and lower castes down to dogs, pigs and Chandalas or outcastes. (Chhandogya Upanishad, V. 10. 7). Thus each caste or group of men was considered to have had a separate origin in creation, and the fact of a man's being found born in one or other of these *species*,—for the distinction was nothing short of it—came to be held as an infallible index of the state of his soul. It is this fact which Krishna is made to declare in the Bhagavat Gita in the following well-known words: "The four castes were created by me according to the apportionment of qualities and works. Know that I, though actionless and inexhaustible, am the author of them" (IV. 13). And there is no greater calamity than the confusion of castes (III. 24), says the same deity. Hence, there being an indefinite number of future mundane existences in store for those who have fallen from their higher caste, they will, as a reward for their fidelity to the rules traced out for them in the low castes where they find themselves, be born in a future life as Brahmins and be saved through the rites reserved for Brahmins alone! Thus we see that the caste system as conceived and imposed on Indians by the Brahmins, and the theory of transmigration flowing as a corollary from their pantheism, complemented and strengthened each other.

But we must not suppose that the other classes tamely submitted themselves to the theories and pretensions of an overweening priestly class. The Kshatriyas especially, from among whom almost all kings and princes were drawn, felt the slight offered to them, and many were the bloody struggles between the Brahmins and the fighting class which India had to witness. At this juncture the great reformer Buddha appeared on the scene. Himself the son of a ruler, he preached a faith which tended to re-establish the religious equality of all men. He had especially his eye on the priesthood which he wanted to tear down from the lofty pedestal of ascendancy which it had acquired through the Vedic sacrifices. Naturally, therefore, he set to abolish the sacrificial system itself which he did most effectually with the Brahminical theory of transmigration. He argued consistently that since animals were no other than men reborn as such, the slaughter of animals for sacrifice was a heinous crime. The Kshatriyas hailed him as a powerful helper in their cause and the Vaisyas found in him a liberator from Brahminical tyranny. The princes of the land patronised Buddha's teachings wherever it was announced, and the Brahmins were for a time utterly defeated, and in consequence obliged to flee to other lands or dissemble their beliefs and practices. Thus a colony of Brahmins took refuge in Rajaputna and established themselves on the heights of Mount Abu where they found a tribe of warriors—the present day Rajputs—whom they resolved to adopt as a new race of Kshatriyas for helping them to exterminate the old one and its new-fangled faith, Buddhism. It is owing to the help of the Rajputs, noted for their fanaticism and recklessness no less than for their bravery, that Brahminism was able to see Buddhism and

the true Kshatriyas of old gradually disappear from India, and to reassert caste ideas which for a time had well-nigh been obliterated.

But it is curious to observe that, although the caste system survived the Buddhistic onslaught, the sacrificial system almost entirely perished under it owing perhaps to the very emphasis which Brahmins laid on the transmigration theory for upholding their pet system. For, as belief in transmigration became intense, Buddha's arguments for the non-slaughter of animals grew also more convincing, and in the same proportion as the caste system took hold of the Indian mind, the ancient sacrificial system also lost its grip.

THE MEANING OF TAMIL CASTES.

It has been shown that among the Aryans the caste system was most probably the result of a religio-political legislation for which the Brahmins were responsible. The distinction of classes according to avocations was, indeed, a natural outgrowth. But the impassable barrier between class and class and the fanciful multiplication of sub-castes was doubtless artificially introduced by the *Smritis*. How then did the Tamils come under this system?

The answer to this question can easily be gathered from what has so far been seen in this study. Somewhere between the tenth century B. C. and the beginning of our era, the Aryans had, by slow degrees, settled in the Tamil land, and had, by slow degrees also, gained its inhabitants to their faith. It is supposed indeed on convincing grounds that "the Dravidians have given more than they received. Siva worship is essentially Dravidian in origin and aspect. The fourth *Veda* and many of the *Upanishads* and *Agamas*, the *Sathapatha Brahmana Sutra* and many

commentaries, although written in Sanskrit, claim Dravidian authorship" (*Hindu Organ* 21-12-16). But for what they received in religious beliefs, gods and goddesses, the Aryans repaid in social institutions and a higher intellectual culture. Thus, while the Aryans began to compose new mythologies and fashion new synthetic gods for what came to be known as the Hinduism of our days, the Tamilians busied themselves in modelling their society on the lines of the Aryan caste-system and in creating a literature dominated by Sanskrit ideas. Everything distinctively Aryan began to be copied. The Tamils created a *Drāvida Vedam* for themselves in imitation of the Sanskrit Vedas and constituted the old-time soothsayers (Parppar) or priests of the Tamil land *Dravida-Kurukkal* with a ritual composed in Sanskrit. The Aryan Smritis were also imitated in Tamil. The *Kural* of Tiruvalluvar and the *Naladiyar* are some among such. And it became the fashion, besides basing the Tamil on Sanskrit grammar, to introduce as many Sanskrit words as possible into the language. It is to this, let us note *en passant*, is due the fact that the Tamil vocabulary is such an unwieldy thing. For instance, take the word 'hand.' The Tamil writer and speaker will not only call this member a '*kai*' in his own language, but also use a list of Sanskrit names such as '*karam*,' '*astam*,' '*pani*,' &c. to designate the same object.

The caste system, then, was imported into the Tamil land along with the other things purely Aryan; and the new soil proved very congenial for its growth. For, in South India, above all, were gathered a conglomeration of races of every description from the Kushite aborigines of the misty past to the various ramifications of the Kolarian, Dravidian and Aryan streams of immigrants who had

entered India at different epochs. There can hardly be any doubt that, as in other lands, here too the general tendency would have been to amalgamate all these various elements into a homogeneous whole in course of time and build up a nation (as all other nations were actually built up), were it not for the caste system which stepped in and kept each race and tribe apart by the most stringent rules ever framed.

This race basis, as we may call it, of Tamil castes is not as much recognised as it ought to be. Take, for instance, the Pariahs of the Tamil land, with the same class of people among the Telugus, the Canarese, the Malayalees, and the Tuluvas, called Malas, Holias, Polyar and Battaduras respectively. According to ancient authorities and many moderns, these were among the aborigines of India. It is highly probable that they were once lords of the land in Southern India as many customs and traditions among them indicate. They seem, however, to have been brought down to the condition of slaves by the aggressive agricultural classes by the time the caste system was definitely introduced in the South. Once enslaved, they were given the most abject kind of services for their masters, which gradually brought them to a vile and despicable condition. When the Aryan ideas of specific distinction between the various classes of society and caste-pollution were adopted by the masters, these poor creatures were designated and treated as "untouchables" and the basest of men. The laws of Manu provided that their "dwellings must be outside the village; their sole wealth must be dogs and asses; their clothes should be garments of the dead; their dishes for food, broken pots; their only ornaments, black iron. A man who regards his religious duty must not hold intercourse with them.

Ignobility, coarseness, savageness, laziness, reveal here a man of impure origin." (X. 51-58.) The other cruelties and inhumanities these rightful sons of the soil were subjected to under the caste system, need not be detailed here.

This interesting race was not the only one brought low under the Aryan caste system. Other tribes such as the Sakkiliyar, Pallar, &c., who also assert they were once a ruling power, suffered the same fate. (See an exhaustive study in this subject in Laouenan: *Du Bramanisme et de ses Rapports avec le Judaïsme et le Christianisme*, i. 90 seq.)

Then there were other aboriginal tribes such as the Mar, who seem to have always enjoyed freedom by the end of life they led; and there were the Nagas, the Maravas and other civilised Kolarian tribes, besides many mountain clans such as the Coles, the Gonds and the Bhills among Kolarians, and the Bedar, the Irular, and the Tbdar among the Dravidians. These racial differences were naturally made the working basis for the new social system, and the impassable barrier of caste which did not originally exist between race and race was raised with a firm hand.

As in the case of Aryan castes, we may well believe some new Tamil castes and sub-castes were also artificially formed. But this must have been a comparatively rare thing. Even where Manu speaks of the creation of new castes by contracting forbidden marriages, we should carefully distinguish between the names of tribes which already existed—to whose level the law relegated the issues of delinquents—and the new grades of society created by legislation. Thus the Pundrakas &c., who are said to have fallen from the status of Kshatriyas, already existed before the code of Manu was issued. So, too, we must

interpret Tamil writings which give a fanciful origin to the various castes in the Tamil land. As examples let us quote, from the old work *Chati-peta-villakkam* by Ulaganata Panditar, what is said about the Paraiyar and Yalpanar, two aboriginal tribes without the least doubt. The former, we are assured, came into being by Sudras marrying Brahmin women and "were appointed to reside at a hundred *kol* distance from the town, and prohibited to enter it after mid-day" lest their shadow pollute caste-people! (86). Of the latter, who formed one of the three sections of an aboriginal fishing people, it is said: "The Yalp-panar caste was brought about by children begotten by Vaisyas on Brahmin women." (45). In the same strain the work goes on deriving all castes from the four Brahminical Varnas!

MERITS AND DRAWBACKS.

Let us conclude with a few words on the merits and drawbacks of the system. We are not of the number of those who condemn all past institutions wholesale because modern ones are better suited to us of the present day. The caste system certainly had some merits in those days. In the first place it effectually kept race mixture at arm's length, and the Brahmins owe to it entirely that they have remained more or less an unmixed race to the present. In the second place, it secured an even division of labour over the whole country. Every village and township had, in its several castes, each following a hereditary occupation and no other, the producers of raw material, the artisans, the tradesmen, and the guardians of peace and order essential for its autonomy. At a time when communication between distant places was so difficult and each village led its separate self-contained life, when ideas of 'Nationhood' and 'United India' did not trouble our ancestors,

that aspect of the caste-system which coincided with the idea of medieval European workmen's guilds and brotherhoods did assuredly possess merits of its own.

But we must not forget the drawbacks which unfortunately more than counterbalanced its merits. If it helped the Brahmins to safeguard the purity of their extraction, it also furnished them with that self-conceited ascendancy which has been a formidable weapon in their hands to grind down the other castes, and chiefly the helpless Sudra. Their scheme of hereditary occupations indeed would seem to have given opportunities to the individuals in every caste to perfect its particular craft by utilising its accumulated traditional experience. But the actual fact of the case is that the crafts have woefully suffered by the impossibility of introducing fresh talent and of profiting by a comparative study of methods—which resulted from the caste-exclusiveness of the craftsmen. In fact, we remark in all Indian crafts of the caste-predominating days a downward course of deterioration rather than an upward effort,—a state of stagnation at best, rather than one of progress. If this was so for the individual life of each caste, society at large suffered even more. There was no common civic life, much less 'national' life. The kingdoms of which the India of the Indians was composed were never more than a heterogeneous mass of principalities often at daggers drawn with one another, kept down with utmost difficulty by their rulers who were themselves constantly tearing one another to pieces.

But the injustice done by the caste system to the individual was its most glaring drawback. Human liberty was enthralled by it in a most inhuman way. However talented a pariah may be, he cannot seek an employment congenial to his state, but must be ever occupied with the

vile services his birth has doomed him to. To the end of ages, he can never rise above his squalid surroundings. The caste system was the great abettor of slavery in India. The 'depressed classes' of India are the product of its policy of oppression. It inculcated, in the words of Sabaratna Mudaliyar, "that every animal has its own instinct and that it should proceed in its own lines. If all animals are mixed up together—and are fed with the same food—and are treated alike, none of them will be able to make any progress According to the Hindu *shastras* there are 900,000 varieties of human beings, of whom the varieties of India are grouped into the four main heads of *Varunas*. The instinct peculiar to each of the *Varunas* is conveyed from father to son by the law of heredity—by a law of Divine dispensation, and we cannot progress if we ignore the importance of this instinct and proceed against the law of nature" (*H. O.*, 9-12-16). This modern Hindu writer is merely voicing the sentiments of the Gita which affirms : "According as each man devotes himself to his proper work does he attain consummation... Better one's own caste-duty ill done than another's caste-duty well done" (*XVIII.* 45, 47). And the Markandeya Purana : "The dwellers of hermitages call them 'slayers of virtue' who in this world do not conform to their caste duties" (*VIII.* 177) There is no ambiguity in the Sanskrit Scriptures as to the supposed evil of caste-mixture. "Confounding of caste brings to hell alike the stock's slayers and the stock ; for their fathers fall when the offerings of the cake and the water to them fail. By this guilt of the destroyers of a stock, which makes castes to be confounded, the everlasting laws of race and laws of stock are overthrown. For men the laws of whose stock are overthrown a dwelling is ordained in hell" (*Gita.* I

42-44). The greatest injustice was done to the individual in the field of religion. The Brahmins had made the caste system rest upon a religious basis for compassing their ends the more effectively. This meant that the unmixed Aryan castes—the Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaisha—alone had the privilege of practising any religion at all. The others were not to be taught the law, nor were they allowed to perform any ceremony of expiation. They were all to be considered as dogs and other brutes until they were fit to be born again in one of the three Varnas. It is as a set off against this Brahminical exclusiveness that the Tamils, who had been so foolish once as to class themselves as Sudras, created their Saiva Siddhanta religion with its system of *Dikshas* for and by the Sudras. All this shows that every self-respecting Tamil should endeavour to shake off the thralldom of caste as far as he is able, so that our ancient ideals of a casteless, free, Tamilian society may once more prevail in our midst.

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