

VALANKAI-ILANKAI DIVISIONS IN MEDIEVAL TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

The social structure of medieval Tamil society was marked by a peculiar dual division in the form of the Valankai and Ilankai, or the Right-hand and Left-hand groups. Both of these divisions traditionally had ninety-eight castes in their fold and enjoyed some social privileges as well. The precise origin of these two divisions is not clear, but the epigraphical evidence, particularly from the time of Kulottunga III (1178–1218 AD), suggests that these divisions emerged in the Chola period, although the inscriptions of Rajaraja I refer to the regiments of these divisions as well, suggesting their existence in the earlier period. The rivalry between the two divisions may have emerged as a result of socio-economic, religious, and political factors, as well as the quest for ritual supremacy and social superiority. Over time, myths were developed, especially by the Ilankai groups, to justify their position in society. Significantly, the division was not limited to the conventional caste system, as both the higher and lower castes were found to be part of both groups. This clearly reveals the complexity of the socio-political structure of the time. This paper will seek to discuss the historical, inscriptional, mythological, and socio-economic aspects of the Valankai and Ilankai division.

Keywords: Medieval Tamil Society; Valankai; Ilankai; Chola Period; Kulottunga III; Caste Division; Social Conflict; Religious Rivalry; Inscriptions; South Indian History

Introduction

Medieval Tamil society was marked by a special and intricate form of social organization, in which society was divided into two factions: the Valankai (Right-hand) society and the Ilankai (Left-hand) society. This was not the division of society into the classical four castes. Rather, it was a broader division of society in which some castes of the high and low variety formed two factions. Both the Valankai and Ilankai societies were said to have been comprised of ninety-eight castes each. However, this was only conventional and not factual.

The historical background of the formation of the Valankai and the Ilankai factions is still shrouded in ambiguity. However, the inscriptional records during the reign of Rajaraja I do refer to the presence of the Valankai regiments. Evidence regarding the systematic formation of the factions is available during the reign of Kulottunga III (1178-1218 A.D.). It was during this period that the difference between the two factions was marked and supported with inscriptional and literary records. The Cholan Purva Pattayam manuscript and the inscriptions on the temples at Kanchipuram enable us to get a glimpse of the social developments during the period.

Apparently, the rivalry between the two factions was a result of the prevailing political, economic, and religious issues prevailing during the 11th and 12th centuries in South India. For example, the landholding agricultural communities and their dependents were associated with the Valankai division, while traders, artisans, and manufacturing communities were associated with the Ilankai division. Religious issues also contributed to the rivalry between the two factions, especially during conflicts between the Brahmanas, Jains, and other sects such as the Saivas and the Vaishnavas. For example, issues concerning the right to perform religious rituals contributed to the rivalry.

Apparently, mythical origin tales were developed with the aim of promoting the social status claims among the Ilankai communities. For example, the mythical origin tales concerning the Agnikunda origin of the communities and the association with the worship of the deity Sakti were developed with the aim of promoting the social dignity claims among the Ilankai communities. Apparently, the rivalry was also a result of the conflict between the indigenous people and the later immigrants.

Hence, the Valankai-Ilankai classification was not a mere caste hierarchy, but a dynamic socio-political system that was subject to change based on the fluctuations of the economy, the rise of new

religions, and the interventions of the kings. This period marks a significant phase in the social evolution of Tamil society.

Historical Background of the Valankai and Ilankai Divisions

The Medieval period society was divided into two broad classes namely Valankai and Itakai groups which means Right hand group and Left-hand group. Each of these groups consisted of 98 castes which claimed certain privileges. The Valankai group usually claimed superiority over the Ilankai group but through the times the latter claimed superiority over the former. This led to a conflict between the two groups. Both high and low castes were included in these divisions, among whom the Paraiyars and Pallas played a leading role in the conflicts. While tracing the origin of the Valankai and Ilankai it indeed shrouded mystery. The origin was mentioned only in the inscription belonging to the reign of Kulottunga III, 1178-1218 A.D. But even before the reign of Kulottunga III references are made to the existences of such division in the Tamil Society. The Valankai regiments are mentioned in the Rajaraja I inscription. The existence of such regiments is not traceable in the inscription of Pre- Rajaraja. But the evidences regarding their origin of this group is found only from the time of Kulottunga III reign. This faction dispute seems to be the outcome of the Political, Social and Religious jealousies among the Hindu of the South India during the 11th & 12th Century A.D.¹.

Epigraphical and Literary Evidence from the Chola Period

The manuscript of the Cholan Purva pattaivam gives an account of the social changes in Tamil Nadu during the Medieval period. This manuscript was of old copper plate of chola king discovered at Kanchipuram. By this old copper plate, we can get reference about the society and government organized during the chola period. According to four Vedas the classification was the Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and the Sutra. These four castes were further divided into 6 sub-castes thus which brings the count of 24 castes for each varna and total of 96 castes. Apart from these two low castes namely Pariya and Matiga which extended to total of 98 total castes. There was no mention of the names of each caste but a mention was made particular about the cast of Vellalas, Koikolas and Cettis. It is said that the Karikala chola brought them from the over populated region to under populated region ones such as Konku country. Here Karikala may be identified as Kulottunga chola III because he was one of kings who assumed the title after karikala of Sangam age. In the Pariyur temple inscription a mention was made regarding the king's title as Konerimaikondan which was assumed by Kulottunga III².

- (a) The name of Cataiyappa Mutali and Kasturi Ranga Cetti with whom Kulottunga was associated are mentioned in pattiyam.
- (b) The period of Kulottunga III is said to be the age in which the differentiation of Tamil society into Right hand and Left-hand groups assumed great prominence.

Mythical Narratives and Religious Disputes

During the period of Kulottunga III, the mythical origin of Ilankai classes seem to have been invented and popularized. The inscription of his period says that in an Ilankai section namely Pallis were created by God from Agnikunda in order to protect the Rishi. Kasyapa, the demons who desecrated the yaga sacrifice the Pallis helped the Rishi to complete the Yaga successfully. For this Pallis were honored by Arindama Chola by taking them in a chariot and settled them in a new colony where their settlement was with non-Brahmana castes. They were safeguarding them all, while and accompanied them sitting in the rear of the chariot and carrying the slippers and umbrella of the Rishis. When the Brahmana sages got down from their carriage some of the castes supported them from left side and so they were called as Left-hand caste. Along with the Brahmanas they settled in new colonies there after they resolved to stand as one and assert their rights, they also decided to have the feather of the crane and loose hanging hair as their symbol³.

The origin tradition of the two sects had quarrel and appealed to karikala chola (i.e.) Kulottunga III for their settlement of dispute in which one party was standing on the right side and were assigned distinct flags and musical instrument⁴. This custom of asking the people to stand on Right- and Left-

hand sides of a judge was found in place like Karikal and Pondicherry of modern times. Another record says that when the people went to Tesa Aya Cettis for the settlement of dispute the latter placed the sacred bell and seal of Goddess Meenashi amman in the middle and asked the Vellalas and Pariyars to stand on the right side while Cakkilis, Kammalas and Komultis on the left side ⁵. In this the Cakkilis were the workers in leather, Kammulas were the artisan and Komuttis were traders. The origin of the Valankai and Ilankai classes is a mythical. It provides only ilankai groups did not enjoy the privilege but suddenly became class consciences and asserted their right and had invented a story about their origin.

The social division of Right hand and Left-hand was due to the stiff resistance put forth by the conservative Land owners in order to maintain preeminence against the traders and manufacturing groups who adopted a new way of living owing to the influence of foreign nations ⁶. The landlords and their agricultural laborers who maintained old social orders were called as Valankai. These groups changed their habits according to changing times. The manufacturing classes were called as ilankai. This contention that it was grouping of industrial classes verse agricultural classes. The traders were called as Beri Cetti's, Komuttis while the agriculturists were called as Pallis and Pallas. According to T.W. Ellis, it was a fight between Industrialist verse Agriculturist the former under Jain and the latter under the Brahmanas. In which the latter kept themselves aloof. The Jains in the early stage was hated by the Saivites and were converted to Saivism. These converted Jains were kept under Ilankai class. But some of them have raised their status to that of Valankai by the favor of the Kings.

There was a fight between Brahmanas and Jains for use of the five big drums and Kalasa which was the privilege of the Valankai groups. The king Vir Bakka Raya interceded and decreed that the Jains belonging to Valakai and therefore the insignia belonged to them ⁷. As the Brahmanas included in the broad social division during the chola period. This is inferred from the Itankai Valankai Kaifiyat ⁸. The situation related to great dispute between Vaishnava Brahmanas with their followers called as Valankai group or Right-hand class and Saiva Brahmanas with their followers known as Ilankai group or Left-hand class regarding the usage of Garuda banner. Both Right hand group and Left-hand group claimed the right to bear the banner of Garuda. This dispute was referred by Vikarama Choladeva, 1192 A.D. The king caused the old copper plate, records of Kanchipuram to be disinterred and examined and consulted legal authorities to find the solution for the Saiva Brahmana and Vaishnava Brahmana. Finally, the claim over the usage of Garuda banner went to Vaishnava Brahmana. This condition paved a way an enumeration of classes into two lines as Vaishnavas and Saiva's. According to Rajaram Narayan Saletore, a well-known Indian historian, scholar and author says that *"From the manner in which the lowest castes are clubbed with the highest. The division was a sort of challenge to the ancient Varnasrama system"* In this connection the Vaishnava Brahmanas are clubbed with Paraiyas and called them as Valankaimattar (friends). In this Valankai group the Canars, the Caliyans, Kommuttis and Vellals were kept. While in the Saiva Brahmanas the Cetti, Pallis, Kammalon, Cakkills were considered as the Ilankai or Left-hand division⁹.

Social Structure, Occupational Grouping and Mobility

Another factor in this distinction between the Valankai and Ilankai classes was the social precedence claimed by the inhabitants over the later immigrants. The latter were not allowed to entry the temple, use of public wells, public roads. This was an antipathy which created differences in their social rights. In the History of Travancore, the Brahmanas and the Pillaimar of Vetasserri in South Travancore looked down upon the inhabitants of Parasuram perunteru, who came from a distant land and lived by dying clothes. They were kept aloof due to low origin and belonged to Ilankai group. Further they were not allowed in the presence of the king, forced to pay extra taxes. So, this group appealed to the king and came to a settlement and their grievance was solved. The king ordered their right to entry into temples, use public roads, use of well and tanks, any need not to pay extra tax except Kappalvari and Paraippanam¹⁰. The persons coming from foreign or distant region were considered as Ilankai caste even the Oddaras from Orissa, the Reddis from Andhra and the Tuluvas and Banajigas from Kannada were considered as Valankai castes. The recruitment into these two castes were made by the wishes of the leaders of the various communities yet it was flexible. According to an inscription

the Malayamakkal and Nattamakkal were admitted into the Ilankai caste by Nattavar of several Natus assembled at Tiruvalancuram during the period of Raja raja chola ¹¹.

The total of 98 castes is first mentioned in an inscription from Atuturai which records the hardships to which these subcastes were exposed at the hands of the Vanniya tenants and the Brahmana and Vellala landlords who were backed by government official¹². The number was to be conventional and there was no fixity as to the exact number of castes existed in each class. There was a provision of addition and deletion by the Nattavar. Further any new communities wanted them to be added in the society it would be accepted by their kings, Brahmana gurus they were admitted in the Valankai class if rejected in the Ilankai class. In the Tamil a saying that, the Paraiyar are not Ilankai caste but are Tamilar ¹³. The Paraiyar who had to live under the patronage of Vellala and Brahmanas landowners accepted their leadership and practiced to worship God Siva along with their traditional deities such as Mariam man, Padar Amman and Mariappan they were known as Valankai mattat¹⁴.

According to a manuscript, the Vellalas and their follower belonged to the Right hand while the Kammalas and their followers belonged to Left-hand group. The Kammalan never accept the supremacy of the Vellalas and the Brahmana priest. They worshipped kali and had separate priest for marriage and funeral. It is that there are connected with Aboriginal Naga tribes ¹⁵. From that time the Kammalas claimed their superiority to the Brahmanas. The Sakti worshipper was included in Vama practices and were called as Ilankaiyar. Since, Ilankaiyur seems to take its first origin with the Kammala the worshipper of Kali. The Beri Cettis, Pallas and Cakkillis who are the leading group of Ilankai class worshipped Sakthi in one form while the Beri Cettis worship Kannika Paramesvari, Palli's worship Draupadi, Cakkillis worship Gangamma and Pallans worship Kali and other goddesses any even sacrifice buffaloes. We can see that the Ilankai communities employed their own priest for their wedding and funeral and repudiate the authority of the Brahmanas ¹⁶. Even though the Kammala were considered superior than brahmanas, In Tontai Mantala Catakam, a medieval tamil poetical work there is a reference to the suppression of Kammalas ¹⁷.

Another reason for calling the Sakti worshipper as Ilankaiyar by the Hindu mythology that God Siva was also called as Ardhanarisvara. In this Sakti is on the left half of God Siva so the worshipper of Sakti is called as Ilankaiyar. The 98 castes of Ilankai class have no names. Beri Cetti, Nakara Vanikar, Kaikkolar, Kammalar, Palli, and Pallas were the chief left hand cast often mentioned but more than 50 names of Right-hand castes is mentioned in the manuscripts and district manuals ¹⁸. From the above we can see that those who were more privilege called as Valankai and less privileged called them as Ilankai. The privileges were granted by kings and Nattar who decided the social, religion and political factors.

Conclusion

Valankai and Ilankai divisions formed a noteworthy structural element of medieval Tamil society, which was clearly influenced by the interplay of caste, occupation, religion, and political power. Though situated in the larger Hindu social framework, the divisions seem to have functioned as dynamic and negotiable categories, rather than being hereditary ones. Both high and low castes were represented among the members of these two divisions, which reinforces the argument that medieval Tamil society was aligned by a combination of political patronage and economic interests.

The inscriptional evidence, particularly that of the rule of Kulottunga III, confirms the evidence of the division's official recognition in the later Chola period. The emergence of claims to mythical, sectarian, and ritualistic origins further supports the notion that medieval Tamil society was highly preoccupied with the search for legitimacy and mobility in terms of such categorizations. The conflicts that developed over the flag, the rights at the temple, the musical instruments, and the ritualistic honors help to further emphasize the importance of official recognition within the medieval Tamil society. The division between the Valankai and Ilankai reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of medieval Tamil society which was present within the 11th and 12th centuries in South India. In fact, the split which developed between the two is said to be a complex social structure which was heavily influenced by economic, religious, and royal issues. In fact, the division that occurred between these two groups serves to illustrate the nature of medieval Tamil society.

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