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# IMPACT OF SANSKRITIZATION ON TAMIL SOCIETY

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Indian society has been divided into various classes and the caste system is very prevalent in India since starting of the society till date. Sanskritization is a process by which "a low or middle Hindu caste, or tribal or other groups, changes its customs, ritual ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born caste". Generally, such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant class by the local community, and according to him, Sanskritization is not just the adoption of new customs and habits, but also includes exposure to new ideas and values appearing in Sanskrit literature.

## **Sanskritization**

The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. The movement has always been possible, especially in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. This process has been called 'Sanskritization' or 'Brahminization' or Aryanization.<sup>1</sup>

Tamil Nadu had a glorious past. In the early days, Tamil Civilization developed independently without any outside influence, till the advent of Aryans. The Aryans reached India from Central Asia with their cattle, goods and Gods. Since then, the Aryanization process also started. Aryans began to



move south because of deteriorating political conditions that existed in North India,<sup>2</sup> and due to a series of foreign invasions from the days of Darius to Alexander. The Buddhist activities of Asoka too compelled them to migrate towards the South. They settled gradually not all of a sudden. The cultural elements of the Aryans slowly penetrated the society of Dravidians. This cultural assimilation and integration were known as Aryanization. It was started in 1000 B.C.<sup>3</sup> and the impact was obvious in the social, religious and political setup of South India. Sanskritization had a strong impact on Tamil Language, Tamil Religion and radical changes in the society.

### **Impact on Traditional Worship**

Tamil people worshipped food grain since it is their source of living. They were all identified in different forms such as food grains, human and metal images. The immature crops in the form of Mulaippari are prepared a few days before the celebration starts.<sup>4</sup> Different types of stones, which resemble the parts of the human body in the form of andromorphic elements, are also worshipped by the folk people. Agriculture is the main activity of folk people. Hence, they have perceived the presence of a divine spirit within food grains and its supportive natural elements such as weather, rain, sun and other forces.<sup>5</sup> In due course, they also began to worship the deceased heroes, who lost their lives for the protection of the village.<sup>6</sup> Among the world's religious traditions, the Tamil tradition is an impressive one. For the past two thousand and five hundred years or more, the religion of Tamil society has consisted of two types of worshippers. The first is comprised of about ten per cent of the population interested in agamic religion. The content and fashion of their religions have changed from time to time ranging from the spectrum of Jainism, Buddhism, Saivism and Vaishnavism. The religious beliefs and practices of the remaining ninety per cent of the population had never been subjected to rapid changes as



in the case of the first category since they worshipped mother goddesses in various forms and names.

Village gods like Aiyanar and Madurai Viran were once human beings transformed into deities due to their heroic activities. Likewise, Mariamman and a host of other deities have also transformed into deities. Most of them even now receive sacrifices of cocks and goats. A few decades ago, the more 'powerful' of the gods and goddesses received the sacrifice of buffaloes. The people considered that the local gods and goddesses are powerful. There is a saying even in the sophisticated and educated circles that: 'This local god is powerful': 'That local goddess is dangerously touchy'.

The trend today is to Sanskritise the deities of folk tradition to give way to the practices of the temples of Vedic tradition. Religiously the deities of folk tradition are not a welcome feature of the Vedic tradition. However, in a changing economic scenario, the priests of Vedic tradition are ready to render their services to these temples as priests. They have adopted different means and strategies. The process adopted is called Sanskritisation. In this, the deities of folk tradition are transformed physically to match the deities of Vedic tradition. New meanings, messages and significance are attached to the folk deities. Folk deities are brought to the ambit of Vedic tradition either by establishing new blood relationships or through the silent revolution of the Hindu revivalists.

Folk deities are the outcome of the feelings and thoughts of folk people. These deities are worshipped not only by the folk people but also by some of the socially backward people following their social and cultural settings. But Vedic religion assimilated the elements of folk religious tradition through the ages and made it a part of the popular Hindu religion. Gradually the deities of folk tradition are being Sanskritized for aiming at total Hindu revivalism.<sup>7</sup>



In India, when Dravidians excelled in civilisation it attracted the eyes of Aryans when they began to penetrate towards the south. Slowly they influenced the whole of society. Socially, politically, culturally and economically Vedic people became stronger and influential. To dominate people, they Sanskritized all walks of life and through which they tried to attain the formation of Hindu revivalism. In Tamil Nadu, it also occurs in the form of Sanskritization of the deities of folk tradition. It is visible when a closer look at the puranic story and temples of the popular deities of folk tradition is made.

The simple form of traditional worship came to an end, and they made worship very ornamental. They made it attractive by introducing the Nigama system of rituals and worship.<sup>8</sup> Importance was given to sacrifices. North Indian Gods and Vedic principles were introduced into Tamil Nadu. The expansion of various forms of sacrifices brought under the control of the Brahmins.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the traditional geographical divisions and the land system came to an end. Secularism that existed in Tamil Nadu began to diminish. In later Pallavas, Cholas, Vijayanagar till the present, Sanskrit became the priestly language.

### **Impact on Society**

The Society was divided into various divisions due to the introduction of the caste system. The land rights of the common people were transferred to the Brahmins and the temples. Aryanization influenced politics and literature. The rulers who ruled Tamil Nadu issued Charters and inscribed inscriptions in Prakrit and Sanskrit languages. As a part of Sanskritization, they introduced Sanskrit names to places and persons. Sanskrit names dominated temples. As a result, Sanskrit dominated religion, language and society. Hence Aryanization was otherwise called 'Sanskritization.'<sup>10</sup>

The expansion of political and religious activities in Tamil Nadu in the later period led to the domination of the Aryans. They were respected and provided with high posts in the administration. The Tamil rulers enforced the



Varna System in religion and politics. The rulers of the South respected the priestly community of the North. Special attention was given to Vedic sacrifices. Exclusive accommodations like Agraharas and Chaturvedi Mangalam were provided. The rulers donated Brahmadana and Devadhana lands to the Brahmins and temples. These lands possessed facilities and were exempted from taxation. The temple-oriented feudal society developed.<sup>11</sup> Linga worship, the Phallic emblem, and the tufts of Brahmanas were the finest examples. Pollution itself, which is one of the most important factors in the working of Sanskritization, appears to be a development of ancient Dravidians' notion of being infected with immanent sacred power.

Thus, the Sanskritization in Tamil Nadu can be seen as a process only imitating the Brahmanas but also adopting practises which have always belonged to the high ones. Non-Brahmins have been Sanskritized<sup>12</sup> and adopted Aryan customs. And the lower class adopted higher-class ideals for their better position. An example of this is the Nadars, formerly called the Shanars. The Shanars belonged to the caste of toddy tappers in the region around Madras and Travancore. Their position in the caste hierarchy was just above that of the Untouchables. In the nineteenth century via education and a move towards a more respectable occupation, that of merchants, the Nadars (as the Shanars now referred to themselves) gained both economic and social status. In Madurai District and other parts of Tamil Nadu, the Nadars claimed the right to wear the 'poonool' (sacred thread) which was not the custom of the Dravidians at all. They declared themselves to be 'Kshatriyas' in legal documents and Census Reports. The women were forced to carry the pot of water on their hips. The custom of Nadars who migrated to Madurai District was to take marriage processions in which the Maravas were their palanquin bearers. Further, they tied their dhotis in the manner of the Brahmins and they built Nandavanams of their own where they had smeared vibuthi (sacred ash), sandal paste and



vermillion and moved like Brahmins.<sup>13</sup> The Nadars also objected to their women wearing precious jewels and earpieces. Formerly, a large bunch of studs and rings were worn on the earlobes of the women. They visited to show off their riches. Hardgrave adds in his account, “widows used white saris and were not allowed remarriage following the sanskritized customs.”<sup>14</sup>

Many puranic stories were taught to Tamil people. The temples slowly took control of the social setup. In the process of Sanskritization, Aryan elements have been radically altered to fit Dravidian norms. For example, Brahmanas put stronger constraints on widows than do any other group and original Gods in the temples have been replaced by idols with Sanskrit names and that many rites performed in Brahmanical temples are imported from the North: but the treatment of temple idols as receptacles of imminent divine power and the place of the temple in the society go back the time before Aryans. All the Sangam Anthologies are rich in the details of everyday life which are neglected in most Sanskrit literature. Many stories in Tamil Literature can be traced to North India, But the stories have invariably been modified to conform to Tamil ideals. The Aryanaisation of the south and the consequent introduction of the caste system were the two important factors responsible for the origin of slavery in Tamil Nadu.<sup>15</sup>

### **Impact on Tamil Literature**

The period of Sanskritization witnessed the development and domination of the Prakrit and Sanskrit languages. The rulers who ruled Tamil Nadu issued Charters and inscribed inscriptions in Prakrit and Sanskrit languages. They also encouraged the translation of other works into Sanskrit. The *Tolkappiyam*, the earliest work in grammar in the Sangam age presents the rules for the adoption and absorption of the northern language into Tamil.<sup>16</sup> Sanskrit words mingled with Tamil words during the period of Kalabhras.<sup>17</sup>



## **Sanskritization under Pallavas**

Under the Pallavas, the Sanskrit got royal patronage. Many Brahmadeyams were created throughout the country. The migration of Brahmins from Andhra to Tamil country seems to have made some major changes in the society and rural economy. The Agrarian economy changed because of the creation of Brahmadeyams, the tax-free lands, peasants were burdened with heavy taxation. Brahmanical religion, Brahmanical Assembly, formation of new *Varnasrama* social order came into existence.<sup>18</sup>

The early Pallava rulers, who issued the Sanskrit charters, were known as Pallavas of Sanskrit Charters. During their period Sanskrit reached its zenith. They issued Sanskrit – Tamil copper plates with the first part of each in Sanskrit and the second part in Tamil. Example: Pallan Kovil Copper Plates of Simhavarman, Kuram Copper Plates of Paramesvaravarman I etc. Some rulers themselves were well-versed in the Sanskrit language. The Pallava period witnessed the well-established Sanskrit College at Bahur. It imparted higher Sanskrit education. It taught Vedas, Puranas, Philosophy and Dharmasastra. The Hindu-Sanskrit educational institution of Pallavas was called Gatika and provided the Sanskrit medium of the curriculum. It provides Vedic education.

## **Sanskritization under Cholas**

The Cholas period was the golden period of both Tamil and Sanskrit literature. From the eleventh century, Sanskrit had developed into an all-Indian language. With the accession of Kulottunga I to the Chola throne, Sanskritization advanced still further as, Sanskrit the common language of the Cholas.<sup>19</sup> Chola monarchs extended their royal patronage to Sanskrit studies. Some of their endowments are in Sanskrit form. During Muslim rule, Sanskrit works were translated into the Persian language to understand Hindu culture. Saivism and Vaishnavism became popular during Vijayanagar's rule. The



Vadakalai sect in Vaishnavism used the Sanskrit Vedas as religious texts<sup>20</sup> and upholds caste and encouraged Vedic sacrifices and customs.

### **Manipravala Style**

The Jain influence was great and permanent in Tamil Literature. Jains first introduced the Manipravala style in which there is equal admixture of Tamil and Sanskrit.<sup>21</sup> Sri Purana and Gadya Chinthamani two prose works of Jains, were written in this style. It set the pattern for others, for some centuries. The Vaishnavites used this style in writing commentaries to the DivyaPrapandam.<sup>22</sup> The Marathas who ruled in Tanjore in the eighteenth century Sanskritization reached its peak in south India during the period showing the enormous influence of Sanskrit.

### **Opposition to Sanskritization**

In ancient Tamilagam, the Kalabhras adopted an Anti- Brahmanical attitude and suppressed the domination of Sanskrit and Hinduism by encouraging Jainism and Buddhism. Tamil Renaissance questioned the cultural hegemony of Brahmanism. These developments were reflected in art, literature, religion etc. In the twentieth century, Tamil Language Movements such as *Tani Tamil Iyakkam* and *Tamil Isai Iyakkam*, made a significant cultural impact in creating a pure Tamil free from the influence of Sanskrit. V. G Suryanarayana Saastri, the scholar identify the influence of Sanskrit on Tamil, and adopted a pure Tamil name for himself Parithimar Kalaignar first he argued that Tamil is a classical language.

### ***Tani Tamil Iyakkam* (Pure Tamil Movement)**

MaraimalaiAdigal considered a father of Tamil Linguistic Purism and the founder of Tani Tamil Iyakkam (Pure Tamil Movement), he promoted the use of pure Tamil words and the removal of the Sanskrit influence from the Tamil Language.<sup>23</sup> The movement made a great impact on Tamil culture, especially in



language and literature. The beginning of the movement was usually in 1916 even though the process of identifying the influence of foreign words in Tamil and eliminating them can be dated much earlier to the late nineteenth century. The movement was critical of Hindi, Sanskrit and Brahmanical hegemony in Tamil society. Neelambikai compiled a dictionary that provide pure Tamil equivalents to Sanskrit words that had crept into Tamil vocabulary. This movement paved the way for later social movements that countered Brahmanical and the Sanskrit tradition in Tamil society.

### **Non-Brahmin Movement**

In Madras Presidency, Brahmins dominated all the fields of society, especially politics, education and job opportunities in the government. So, the Dravidian Movement emerged as a defence of the non-Brahmins against the Brahmin dominance. The Madras Non-Brahmin Association (1909), the Madras United League (1912), and the Dravidian Home supported the Dravidian movement and opposed Sanskritization. The Self-Respect Movement also criticised Brahmanism and the cultural hegemony of the Brahmins. Tamil Music and dance were also influenced by Sanskritization and it was opposed by *Tamil Isai Iyakkam* and achieved partially. In the meanwhile, when it reaches the folk people received a negative impact. The centres and medium of Sanskritisation, which are used by the Vedic people, are not given significance. The Sanskrit culture and behavioural patterns of Vedic life were criticised by the folk masses. To counter the activities of Vedic people, social activists started to use the same communication medium to bring out the significance of folk culture and way of life. They began to give a wide focus on folk art and culture. On an extreme level, they began to show Vedic people as more cunning and sometimes a comedian. Their style of living, wearing of sacred thread, and *kudumi* were all used as the medium of wit. In Tamil Nadumany films were taken in nurturing these ideas. By which, folk people register their reaction to



this mode of Sanskritisation. The Tamils were not silent at the time of Sanskritisation. They register their protest against the process of Sanskritisation through various movements. Among them the followings were popular and the activities of movements are explained. Kalabhras were the pioneers in this movement. Thereafter Vaikunda Swamigal, Ayothidasar, Bharathidasan, E.V. Ramasamy and Vanamamalai, struggled to regain the lost power and prestige. They made extensive research on the influence of Sanskrit and the introduction of Vedic religion in Tamil society. By the impact of the Sanskrit language and customs, the Tamil language and culture lost its originality.<sup>24</sup> Tamil people adopted various manners of Sanskritization. At present also the Sanskrit language and culture are inseparable from the Tamil language and culture.<sup>25</sup>

Sanskritization is the term coined by Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas in the 1950s. Sanskrit methods made a considerable impact on Tamil Religion, language, customs and manners. Some reformers and revivalists try to change the Sanskritization in Tamil Nadu, But Sanskritization is inseparable in Tamil culture. To conclude the process of Sanskritisation is not a recent phenomenon and happened throughout the ages. If the process resulted in downward mobility would have caused much appreciation from the downtrodden masses. Instead of it, it resulted in only vertical mobility. Once again, the revivalists and Vedic people wanted to establish domination over Tamil subalterns. Hence, it receives various types of opposition. It is a rousing call to the people of Tamil Nadu which has a rich culture, religion and heritage. People must get aware that they are going far from their basic system. It is a time to put a halt to Sanskritization and give an edge to our culture.



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