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## TAMIL SOCIETY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY



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**Abstract:** During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by far the great majority of the people of Tamilnadu were Hindus belonging to both salivate and Vaishnavites sects. There were followers of Jainism also. There was a small population of Muslims also. The rulers of Vijayanagar worshipped Siva till they became Vaishnavites towards the close of the fifteenth century. Krishnadeva Raya was a devotee of Vishnu, but he also worshipped Siva. Vishvanatha Nayak, the founder of the Nayak line in Madurai and his successors were Vaishnavities. The Pandya rulers before the time of the Nayaks had been faithful saivites<sup>1</sup>.

**Keywords:** Society, Kings, nobles led, Agriculture.

### INTRODUCTION:

Kings and nobles led an extravagant and luxurious life in striking contrast to the modest living standard of the rest of the population. Vast majority of the population resided in the villages. Agriculture was the main stay of the economy owing land was considered a mark of prestige. There was a fairly large class of land fewer peasants who assisted in the cultivation of agricultural lands, some of the labourers were in a condition of serfdom<sup>2</sup>. The artisans of the village. There was also a staff of menial servants from the outcastes who were likewise rewarded by shares in the common land, cattle rising and dairy farming was other important occupations. Land was set apart for pasture.

As far as the dress of the common people was concerned in the sixteenth century both men and women were only a piece of cloth around them which went from the waist upto the knee. Some women put on a longer cloth that reached lower down. But they did not cover the upper portion of their body<sup>3</sup>. Harem and sati were confined mostly to kings and nobles. Tirumala Nayak of Madurai is said to have had two hundred wives and Kilavan Sethupathi of Ramnad forty seven wives in their harem. All of them are said to have committed self – immolation on the death of these respective rulers<sup>4</sup>. It was not uncommon even for the ordinary common people to have more than one life<sup>5</sup>.

Caste system held sway in Madurai more strongly than any where else in India. At the head of the society stood the Brahmins who exercised enormous influence in the court of the king and among common people. They were proud of their origin. They were leaders in the fields of education. They were the upholders of religious observances. They never competed for wealth and power. They accepted voluntary gifts offered to them by all classes of people from the ruler down wards. They were supposed to provide patterns of ethical and religious conduct for the rest of the population<sup>6</sup>.

Kshatriya of warrior class came next to that of the Brahmins. This was due to the fact that at that time the profession of arms was at its zenith, held in high esteem and in such full swing that only for brief intervals was the flame of was ever extinguished. Next to them was the trading or Vaisya caste. In Madurai its members were known as Chettis or Komatys. The Sudras formed the fourth caste. It was made up of agriculturists and traders of different kinds. The Sudra caste was split into a large number of subdivisions. The Kallars or professional robbers belonged to the Sudars. So, also the Odayars, who were peasants from the north. Next to them came professional weavers, and finally the Kurumbars who were both shepherds and weavers in woldden cloth only<sup>7</sup>. Then became the outcastes who were generally called panchamas. They are presently known as Adi – Dravidas or less respectively as pariahs. They were despised and ill – treated and considered quite outside the pale of law<sup>8</sup>. Difficulties of the panchamas.

To these outcastes had been allotted, all the lowest and the most degrading jobs – scavengers and sweepers and the lowest of the menial occupations. It was believed that their mere touch would pollute caste people. The outcastes were expected to get off the road in case they had to cross a group of a high caste must fall on them<sup>9</sup>. The out castes who tilled the land and did menial work lived in hamlets of a distance from the village proper<sup>10</sup>. In fact the institution of caste with all its social and economic implication was accepted universally and upholding of the social order organized on its basis was considered to be the primary duty of the king. This accounts at once for the prevalence of much social exclusiveness in matters of food and marriage among different sections of the people. The accent was throughout on the performance of duties attaching to one's station than on the rights of the individual or group.

Tamil society on the eve of the arrival of the Jesuit

missionaries from Europe was strictly a caste bound society. The caste system divided the people into almost infinite and small sub – divisions, strange and hostile to each other common bonds, interest and feelings were lacking. The Jesuits beginning from Francis Xavier started their fight against this lack once they set foot on the coastal areas of Tamilnadu.

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