

*A. R. Venkatachalapathy*

‘More Kshatriya than thou!’  
Debating caste and ritual ranking in colonial Tamilnadu<sup>1</sup>

It is gratifying to note that the ethnological struggle on the part of the several castes of Southern India for social supremacy in the scale of God’s creation is, in my opinion, not altogether without “a soul of goodness” in that it contributes, to no small extent, to enrich the knowledge of the students of the anthropology of the Baratha Kanda, although it is viewed as a sign of an unhealthy state of society by those, of whom I am one, who would like to see the equilibrium of social happiness never disturbed.<sup>2</sup>

In this article I seek to recover and analyse an ideological conflict between two castes in colonial Tamilnadu. In the early decades of the twentieth century a series of acrimonious debates, leading up to even court cases, occurred between two castes each of which not only claimed Kshatriya (Skt. *kṣatriya*, Tam. *kṣattiriyar*) status for itself but also contested the other’s claim to it. Caste conflict, often marked by violence, is by no means novel in Indian society. That the two populous castes of Nadars (Tam. *nāṭār*) and Vanniyars (Tam. *vaṇṇiyar*) aspired to Kshatriya status is well known in the literature. However what marks out the little-known debates that I unearth and discuss here is the fact that these two castes do not inhabit the same region. In the process of Sanskritising and claiming a higher status in the caste hierarchy, M. N. Srinivas observes that “occasionally a caste claims a position which its neighbours are not willing to concede”.<sup>3</sup> The assumption or suggestion here seems to be that the caste(s) that contest the claim are physical neighbours. Nadars predominantly live in the four erstwhile southern districts of Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Madurai and Ramanathapuram, while the Vanniyars are the most populous caste in the northern districts of Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot and Salem districts. The only region where these two castes live in any proximity is the working class neighbourhood of North Chennai, viz., Royapuram, Vannarapettai and Thondaiyarpettai.

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<sup>1</sup> K. A. Manikumar commented on an earlier draft. Bernard Bate subjected the article to detailed criticism. The late Tha. Kovendhan, Mamani and A. Thiruneelakandan provided help with source material. All translations from Tamil sources are mine.

<sup>2</sup> T. Balasundara Mudaliar, ‘Opinions’ in Arumuga Nayakar 1907: 11.

<sup>3</sup> Srinivas 1966: 6.

Nadars faced the brunt of organised violence, especially at the hands of upper caste Nairs (Tam. / Mal. *nāyar*) and Vellalars (Tam. *veḷḷāḷar*) in the early part of the nineteenth century (in the Kanyakumari region) and at the hands of the Maravars (Tam. *maravar*) (in the south Pandya country) in the late nineteenth century (the place names of Kalugumalai, Kamudi, Sivakasi have become metaphors for caste violence not only in Nadar memory but in Tamil collective consciousness as well)<sup>4</sup>. In these cases there is little evidence of ideological argument and only brute physical force prevailed. But the debates I discuss here were carried out exclusively in the emerging public sphere through the medium and modality of print, and were mediated by colonial forms of knowledge.

Before I embark on the exercise of tracing and narrating these debates, a brief summary of the changing status of Nadars and Vanniyars in the context of the colonial transformation is in order. During the nineteenth century, as is now very well known, the transformation of Tamil society was marked by the improved means of communication and transport, wider marketing networks, the incursion of the state in the farthest reaches of society and economy, newer economic opportunities, western education, and the rise of a new elite class within each community.

In his classic work on the history of Nadars, Robert Hardgrave Jr lucidly narrates their dramatic and exemplary rise from a position barely above the so-called untouchables to a position of vast economic, social and political power in less than a century.<sup>5</sup> From pursuing the stigmatised occupation of toddy-tapping, Nadars, through a complex process of engagement with Christianity and colonialism, became a major trading caste in the late nineteenth century. By the 1860s, buttressed by the newly acquired wealth, Nadars adopted new social and ritual practices – they turned to vegetarian diet, adopted teetotalism, wore the sacred thread, applied sacred ash, changed their sartorial and coiffure styles, including golden jewellery for women – and began to claim Kshatriya status. They constructed an origin myth for their caste and claimed that they were the descendants of the Pandya kings. Hardgrave counts at least 40 books extolling the high status and greatness of the Nadars in the seventy five years after 1857.<sup>6</sup> Soon they attempted to enter Sanskritic temples, which was thwarted not only by the violence of Maravars but by the colonial

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<sup>4</sup> In 1895, the Nadars of Kalugumalai village were prohibited by the zamin of Ettaiyapuram from conducting street processions and, in the ensuing riots, many Nadars were killed and their homes looted. In 1897, Nadars attempted to enter the Siva temple in Kamudi in Ramanathapuram district. A suit was filed, which the Nadars lost. In 1899, there was major conflict between Nadars and Maravars in Sivakasi, which resulted in the sack of the Nadar settlement and many murders.

<sup>5</sup> Hardgrave 1969. Also see Templeman 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Hardgrave 1969: 78.

legal-judicial system as well – a situation that did not formally change until late in the colonial period. Caste associations based on communal solidarity and enterprise rarely seen among other castes underpinned the rise of Nadars. The kinship organisation of *uravinmurai*, the subscription system of *makimai*, etc., were used to construct temples, schools and public wells. An attempt was made in 1895 to found the Kshatriya Mahajana Sangam, a provincial level organisation, but floundered, and it was not until 1910 that the Nadar Mahajana Sangam was formed.<sup>7</sup> The community’s association with the Non-Brahman movement, both in the justice and self-respect phases, greatly enhanced the political position of the Nadars, culminating in the spectacular rise of K. Kamaraj as ‘king-maker’ both in the provincial and, later, in the national Congress.

Vanniyars, despite their growing political power in northern Tamilnadu since the reservation agitation in the 1980s and the rise of Pattali Makkal Katchi with its shrewd negotiation of electoral politics in a situation of fragmented polity, are yet to have their Hardgrave, or even a Dennis Templeman. Based largely on secondary sources – especially Thurston, census reports and contemporary newspaper reports and interviews – the Rudolphs sketched the rise of Vanniyars in their classic work *The Modernity of Tradition*.<sup>8</sup> A community made basically of agricultural labourers and tenant farmers, the Vanniyars, despite the proximity to the presidency capital of Madras, have by no means matched the spectacular rise of the Nadars. This is not to gainsay the significant mobility that the community had enjoyed in colonial Tamilnadu. Even by the first census in 1871, Vanniyars had claimed Kshatriya status as descendants of the fire races<sup>9</sup> with the publication of *Cāticaṅkiracāram*. By 1891 the *Vaṇṇiyakula viḷakkam* (*A Treatise on the Vanniya Caste*) was published. Their caste association, the Chennai Vannikula Kshatriya Mahasangam, was established as early as 1888.

Both Nadars and Vanniyars entered the emerging public sphere through the medium of print and caste associations. The earliest Nadar journals were *Cāṇṇōrkula tīpam* (1889) and *Cāṇṇōrkula vivēkapōtini* (1909). By 1897 the first Vanniyar journal, *Akkinikula kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, had been launched by A. Subramania Nayagar, who figures prominently in the debates of the 1910s and 1920s. These were followed by *Akkinikulatittan* (1908), *Vaṇṇiyakula kṣattiriya tīpam* (1912), *Vaṇṇikula mittiraṇ* (1913), *Kṣattiriyaṇ* (1923), *Kṣattiriya cikāmaṇi* (1923) and *Vīrapārati* (1927).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hardgrave 1969: 130–131.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolph and Rudolph 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Kshatriyas were said to have three lineages (Skt. kula): the solar (Skt. sūrya), the lunar (Skt. candra) and the fire (Skt. agni, Tam. akkiṇi).

<sup>10</sup> Kavirinadan 2005: 11–12.

Even though the print runs of these journals were small, they made a deep impact on the identity of these communities.<sup>11</sup>

The proximate reason for the mobilisation of these castes in the late nineteenth century was the census. The Vanniyars demanded the dropping of the name ‘Palli’ (Tam. paḷḷi) and wanted to be returned as ‘Vannikula Khsatriyas’ (Tam. vanniḱula kṣattiriyar). The Nadars similarly did not want to be called ‘Shanar’ (Tam. cāṇār). The demand for a revised nomenclature was premised upon a certain view of Hindu social structure which was being codified by colonialism. This drew upon the Orientalist knowledge that was being recovered, produced and defined using new disciplines such as history, ethnography, epigraphy, etymology, philology and lexicography. Traditional notions of caste hierarchy coalesced with the Orientalist vision of a normatively ordered Indian society. This was so especially in relation to caste as varna (Skt. varṇa) – a theoretical construct –, as distinct from caste as jati (Tam. cāti, Skt. jāti) – a functioning social unit and determined by endogamy.

While caste as jati was certainly a lived reality of indigenous society, caste as varna – a more theoretical construct – had limited currency in Tamil society. While the four-fold varna (Tam. nālvaruṇam) as a phrase had usage, the slots of Kshatriya and Vaisya (Skt. vaiśya) varnas were empty in the Tamil caste structure. This explains, for instance, the phenomenally erudite Sivagnana Munivar, writing in the eighteenth century, being forced to claim a superior and ‘clean’ status for his Vellalar caste by calling it Sat Sudra (Tam. caṛcūttirar) to distinguish it from other lowly Sudras (Skt. śūdra, Tam. cūttirar). By the late nineteenth century, at the height of the Orientalist moment, we find many castes, as part of their upward mobility, claiming higher status by wanting to be assigned a new varna – either Kshatriya or Sudra.<sup>12</sup> The Vellalars claimed Vaisya status for themselves and produced the very influential *Varuṇa cintāmaṇi*.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Nadars and Vanniyars claimed the non-existent Kshatriya varna status. History bears out that these claims for a higher varna status never succeeded. But even the cul-de-sacs of history can often deepen our understanding and it is in this hope that this article explores the now-forgotten debates between the Nadars and Vanniyars.

<sup>11</sup> David Washbrook argues that “... twenty-three years after the foundation [1888] of their Vannikula Kshatriya Sangham, the wealthy Pallis had convinced remarkably few of their depressed brethren to join their campaign (in the 1911 census, 89 per cent of the caste continued to return itself as Palli)”. Washbrook 1975: 171 and endnote. This is completely beside the point.

<sup>12</sup> The much maligned Viswakarma caste, quite exceptionally, claimed Brahman status!

<sup>13</sup> Kanakasabhai Pillai 1925. The book carried forewords from as many as two dozen people of various castes. C. Subramania Bharati, the iconic Tamil poet, wrote prefaces to only two books in his lifetime and *Varuṇa cintāmaṇi* was the first.

## I

From the available evidence the first salvo in the war of the Kshatriyas appears to have been fired in 1907.<sup>14</sup> Ka. Arumuga Nayagar’s elaborate Vanniya interpretation of the history of varnas and the place of Vanniyar in it (the volume runs into about 400 pages), *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* (The Mirror of Caste),<sup>15</sup> devotes the last section of the book to refuting the claims of other castes to higher, especially Kshatriya status. After putatively establishing the Vanniyar claim to Kshatriya-hood, *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* devotes about 10 pages exclusively to demolishing Nadar claims for Kshatriya status. *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* first provides a detailed account, through a verbatim reproduction of Justice Benson’s judgment, of the Kamudi temple entry movement and its ultimate failure. Consistently using the derisive word ‘Shanar’ to refer to the Nadars, *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* emphatically states that “there is no evidence to show that the Shanars are of the Kshatriya lineage or that they come in the line of Pandya and Chola kings”.<sup>16</sup> Refutation of caste status cannot of course be without recourse to etymology and philological exegesis! *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* argued that ‘Nadan’ (Tam. nāṭāṇ) meant “the un-approached or unapproachable” and that ‘Gramani’ (Tam. kirāmaṇi)<sup>17</sup> derived from ‘grama-anniyan’ (Tam. kirāma-ṇṇiyan) or “outcaste to the village”<sup>18</sup> – clearly assigning the Nadar status to outside the caste fold.

But this refutation is not without sociological merit, though couched in patronising terms, when *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* goes on to observe that:

Even though toddy-tapping is the customary caste occupation [of the Nadars], with education, enterprise and wealth they have captured trade. ... As their status had risen due to their wealth they have tried to elevate themselves in the religious temple rituals as well. But in their efforts to equate their status with those of other castes they should not usurp the freedom of the castes above them. They should strive to rise among themselves [?]. If their efforts are in this direction without

<sup>14</sup> In an appendix to his work on the Nadars, Hardgrave provides a chronology of Nadar caste histories in which he lists an 1892 work entitled ‘Pallihal Vayappu’ (= *Pallikal vāyāppu*) (A Refutation of the Palli Caste?) by one K. Shanmuga Gramani. I have not been able to trace this work. Since Hardgrave also does not cite or quote it, one can barely guess its content.

<sup>15</sup> The Rudolphs misdate this volume to 1901 and also wrongly attribute it to T. Ayyakannu Nayagar. They also indicate that the place of publication is not known, while it was in fact published from Madras. Rudolph and Rudolph: 50n.

<sup>16</sup> Arumuga Nayagar 1907: 378.

<sup>17</sup> Gramani is a toddy-tapping caste in northern Tamilnadu. In the colonial period, through the familiar process of aggregation, Gramanis came to coalesce with Nadars, many of whom were migrating to the colonial city of Madras. The aggregation was more political than social and rarely included marriage.

<sup>18</sup> Arumuga Nayagar 1907: 379.

harming others not only will the fair-minded sympathise with them but they can also win the protection of law courts.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* rested its case with the words:

Some later day ‘wise’ men, akin to imprisoning the wind in a pot, published books that the Shanars were Kshatriyas. But all these books contradict one another. Following our earlier arguments it is clear that they are neither Kshatriyas nor Vellalars. As stated in the *tivākaram* and *piṅkalam* [two authoritative medieval verse dictionaries] they rank below the Sudras.<sup>20</sup>

The arguments and insinuations of *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* were carried over in a few years by *Śrī vaṇṇi vamca pirakācikai*.<sup>21</sup> This short catechism was written by Salem Ardhanareesa Varma (1874–1964), a man of many parts and a stalwart in the politics of the Vanniyaars.<sup>22</sup> In his long career spanning over seven decades, Ardhanareesa Varma wrote copiously (he composed the only known verse elegy on Subramania Bharati’s death), published journals, took part in nationalist agitation and organised Vanniyaars. Basing himself on *Cāṭicāṅkiracāram* and *Varuṇa taruppaṇam*, Ardhanareesa Varma explicated the ideas of Vanniyaar superiority in questions and answers apparently for the benefit of ‘boys’. After providing an etymology of ‘Vanniyaar’ (Tam. *vaṇṇi* / Skt. *vahni* = fire, and Skt. *ja* = born of), the catechism elaborates the proliferation of castes by *anuloma*, *pratiloma* and *saṅkara* marriages. Finally it settles down to refuting the Kshatriya claims of some lower castes such as Paravar, Maravar and Vadugar (Tam. *vaṭukar*), including Shanar. With reference to the Nadars it rephrases the etymological arguments of *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* and ridiculed the Nadars for calling themselves *cāṅṛōrkula kṣattiriyar*, “a caste (*kulam*) that does not occur in any textual authority”.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly there is no evidence to suggest that the gauntlet was picked up by the Nadars until many years later. It was the Kammalars who went to court in the Salem Sub-divisional Magistrate’s court immediately after the first edition was published in 1912. The case however was dismissed as the magistrate observed that “it is difficult to

<sup>19</sup> Arumuga Nayagar 1907: 378.

<sup>20</sup> Arumuga Nayagar 1907: 318.

<sup>21</sup> *Śrī vaṇṇi vamca pirakācikai* appears to have been first published in 1912 and reprinted the very next year. I have followed the 2007 reprint edited by V. Balakrishnan.

<sup>22</sup> Shanmugasundaram 1995 is the only available biography on him. Though sloppily written it contains a wealth of information.

<sup>23</sup> *Śrī vaṇṇi vamca pirakācikai*: 32–33.

obtain sensible replies from the plaintiff. ... I do not believe that there are defamatory words in the book”.<sup>24</sup>

Vanniyar intellectuals seem to have continued with their tirade against Nadars and their Kshatriya status. It appears that the *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ*, edited and published by A. Subramania Nayagar from the Perambur Barracks region of North Madras, was at the forefront of this attack. A. Subramania Nayagar, who began his career as a printing apprentice, had risen to be a journalist and activist in Vanniyar politics. He seems to have wielded considerable influence on the Vanniyar working class of the region with its large number of textile mills. He also seems to have evinced antiquarian interests and had started collecting material for his histories and genealogies of Vanniyaars, including the *Vaṅṅiya purāṇam*, from a very early age.<sup>25</sup> He was also instrumental in commissioning, printing, and publishing many works which provided intellectual ammunition for the Vanniyaars’ Kshatriya guns.

September 1919 saw the publication of two journals devoted to Nadar uplift and organisation. *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, published from Thondiarpettai in North Madras, was edited by T. Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani.<sup>26</sup> The journal was certainly published until 1925 (volume six) but I have been unable to find when it ceased publication. T. Vijaya Duraisami Gramani was prominent in the debates concerning the caste and he authored a number of works on Nadar history and culture: *Āriya kṣattiriyakula viḷakkam* (1910), *Namatu kula tolḷil yātu?* (1922), *Kṣattiriyar* (1923), *Namatu kula tolḷil* (1926), *Nāṭār eṇṇum col ārāycci: Araca kulattai kuṟittu eḷutiya or pirapantam* (1927). Some of these works were originally serialised in the *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*. The other journal, *Nāṭār-kula mittiraṅ*, began its career as a monthly and later became a bi-monthly and then a weekly. After the first few years, when it showed Indian nationalist leanings, it became an important mouthpiece for E. V. Ramasami’s Self-Respect Movement within the community. It was edited by S. A. Muthu Nadar and ceased publication only in 1931. Both these journals played a leading part in the acrimonious debate with the Vanniyar journals, *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ* and *Kṣattiriyar*.

<sup>24</sup> *Śrī vaṅṅi vamca pirakācikai*: appendix. It is interesting to note that Kammalar with their Brahman pretensions were often in the forefront of disputing caste claims, starting from the famous Chittoor Adalat Court case (1818) to the use of ‘Achari’ as a caste suffix (during the first Rajaji ministry). The above case, however, seems to strengthen M. N. Srinivas’ assertion: ‘Normally Sanskritisation enables a caste to obtain a higher position in the hierarchy. But in the case of the Smiths [kammalar] it seems to have resulted only in their drawing upon themselves the wrath of all the other castes.’ Srinivas 2002: 202.

<sup>25</sup> See his preface, dated 12 June 1955, to *Tirukkaivaḷam* (Subramania Nayagar 1955).

<sup>26</sup> I have been able to consult volumes I, II and VI. I remember with gratitude my mentor, Tha. Kovendhan, who brought this journal to my notice.

*Vannikula mittiraṇ* was started in 1913 and appears to have continued until 1930. As indicated earlier, it was edited and published by A. Subramania Nayagar. *Kṣattiriyaṇ*, edited by Ardhanareesa Varma, was published from Salem as a monthly. After two abortive attempts to run this journal, he revived it in Chennai when he moved to the city in January 1925. While one issue of *Vannikula mittiraṇ* has survived (a bumper issue containing the June, July, August and September numbers of 1924) nobody seems to have traced even a single issue of *Kṣattiriyaṇ*. Our information of the articles in the Vanniyar journals comes, apart from the single bumper issue mentioned above, from the refutations published in the two Nadar journals. Thankfully, Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani had the habit, something he prided himself upon and challenged his adversaries to emulate, of reproducing verbatim the opponents' views before proceeding to demolish them.

The very third number (November 1919) of *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* carried "A Warning to *Vannikula mittiraṇ*".<sup>27</sup> Adverting to the insinuations that Nadars and Gramanis were not Kshatriyas and that there were no textual authority to prove this status, Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani stated that "abusing other castes is the habit of the unlettered" and asked it to desist from such abuse immediately.

It was only towards the end of 1919, years after the publication of *Śrī vanni vamca pirakācikai*, that the Nadars seem to have taken notice of it. In the very next issue of *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* a detailed refutation of the book appeared by one Ne. Mu. Sha. Shanmugasundara Nayanar of Vannarapettai, Chennai. Ridiculing the claim that only Vanniyars (the derogatory word Palli is used) belong to the Agnikula Kshatriyas and that all royal dynasties including the Chera, Chola, Pandyas, the Kerala kings, and the Vijayanagara kings are their kin, the author also criticised the invidious nature of the book when the nationalist movement was going on towards uniting all the people. Stating that he was writing an elaborate refutation of the book with the title *Vannikku varuṇaṇ* (Rain on the fire), he claimed that many of the notaries who had provided opinions and prefatorial comments had been misled and that they were now willing to set the record straight by writing for the new volume.<sup>28</sup> (Writing in 1924, in the context of litigation against Nadar journals, A. Subramania Nayagar claimed that he had ignored this particular piece as being too ridiculous to require a refutation.<sup>29</sup>)

<sup>27</sup> *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, 1,3, November 1919: 93.

<sup>28</sup> *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, 1,4, December 1919. 123–124.

<sup>29</sup> *Vannikula mittiraṇ*, 'Tiruñānacampanta ceṭṭiyār maṇṇippu katitam', June–September 1924.



After these two pieces of writing in *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* there appears to be a lull for a few years in the debate, or at least the issues of the journals have not survived. In the first number of volume VI (September 1924) there appears a refutation of the writings in *Kṣattiriyaṇ*. By this time the bulk of the journal is taken up by the Nadar-Vanniyar debate. As stated earlier, Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani published Ardhanareesa Varma’s accusations verbatim and then proceeded to contradict them. It appears to be a continuation of published work in earlier numbers, which unfortunately have not survived. In the absence of these files, it is not clear when the tirades had actually been revived. It can probably be dated to early 1924.

An important point in the revived debate turned around the semantics of the words ‘Sandror’ (Tam. *cāṇṇōr*) and ‘Nadar’. While the Vanniyars contended that it meant ‘noble’ people in general, the Nadars claimed that it referred exclusively to their forbears. Another twist to the semantics was the etymology: while Vanniyars claimed that the term came from *cāru* meaning ‘toddy’ the Nadars contended that it came from *cāl* or ‘abundance’ and later extended to mean ‘noble character’. While Nadars treated *nātu* as a noun (meaning ‘country’ and by extension its rulers), Vanniyars treated it as a verb (‘to seek’ and its antonym to ‘avoid’)!

*Kṣattiriyaṇ* had also thrown a wager of Rs 500 to any one who could prove that the term Sandror referred to the Nadars. *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* countered it by saying that now that it had demonstrated this meaning he should, “if he was a true-born upper-caste Palli”, not only republish his refutation but send the wager amount immediately.

If the Nadars’ association with the palm tree and tapping toddy came in for consistent criticism and derision the Nadars in turn always used the term Palli, deeply detested by the Vanniyars, to refer to them. In a quick counter move *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* also went into the origins of the word ‘Palli’ and claimed that it came from the word *paḷlam* (pit) and played on this sense of the word to denigrate Ardhanareesa Varma.<sup>30</sup>

The response from Ardhanareesa Varma seems to have been swift. In the 23 July 1924 issue of *Kṣattiriyaṇ* he raised the wager to a thousand rupees. The *Vannikula mittiraṇ* had also by then joined the issue. One S. Krishnaswamy Iyer raised many questions in an open letter to *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*. He asserted that the evidence cited by the Nadars thus far were ‘shameful’ and that their arguments relied on:

Mere word play not befitting intelligent people ... All you have done so far is to keep repeating the three words, *cāṇṇōr*, *nāṭar* and *kirāmaṇi*. ... Even the words

<sup>30</sup> *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, 6,1, September 1924.

kōṇār, cēṇaikkāraṅ, aruntati-kulam and cāmpāṅ [all lower caste names] appear majestic. ... Therefore mere wordplay won't do.

He raised seven questions. These questions revolved around the antiquity of the titles that the Nadars claimed, the traditional occupation of toddy-tapping, the absence of ruler-ship in terms of zamins, palayams, etc., the prohibition of entry into temples and the lack of literary works on Nadars.<sup>31</sup>

The sole surviving issue of *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ* also carries a refutation by M. S. Subramania Iyer, a journalist and author of several works of vicarious nationalism (the expression of nationalist sentiment and rhetoric by writing about the past wherein the enemy figure is Muslim rather than overtly criticising British colonialism), including a book extolling the bravery of Rajput kings. Written in response to an attack on his book, *Rājaputtira vijayam*, by one Murugadasan in the pages of *Nāṭārkuḷa mittiraṅ*, he argued that there the division of Surya Kulam, Candra Kulam and Agni Kulam among kings did not exist; he asserted that Vanniyars were indeed of the Agni Kulam. He added that, based on the “vulgar essays” by Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani “some Nadar friends are raising pointless arguments”.<sup>32</sup>

Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani now attempted to reply to the questions of both Ardhanareesa Varma and M. S. Subramania Iyer point by point and posed the counter question of the antiquity of the Vanniyar titles such as Nayagar, Varma, Boopathy, etc.<sup>33</sup>

While a modicum of intellectual and social decorum was maintained in the pages of *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ* and *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, no punches seems to have been pulled in *Nāṭārkuḷa mittiraṅ*. One S. S. Sankaralinga Nadar, writing in the pages of *Nāṭārkuḷa mittiraṅ* offensively termed the writings of Ardhanareesa Varma as *ampaṭṭaṅ kuppai* (waste bin of the barber)! He also quoted offensive proverbs and popular sayings about Vanniyars. In a number of places Ardhanareesa Varma's frequent change of names – Varma, Nayagar, Rajarishi, etc. – came in for much ridicule. Vanniyar accusations and innuendoes about the fiasco of Kamudi temple entry and the sack of Sivakasi seem to have particularly rankled in the minds of the Nadars.<sup>34</sup>

*Nāṭārkuḷa mittiraṅ* carried a series of articles by Murugadasan and Sankaralinga Nadar. It asserted that, contrary to their claims to royalty, Vanniyars descended from Kuravar (Tam. kuṟavar) and Vettuvar (Tam.

<sup>31</sup> *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ*, June–September 1924.

<sup>32</sup> *Vaṅṅikula mittiraṅ*, June–September 1924.

<sup>33</sup> *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, 6,1, September 1924.

<sup>34</sup> *Nāṭārkuḷa mittiraṅ*, 15 September 1924. See articles by Sankaralinga Nadar and Nathan.

vēṭṭuvar) tribal communities, ate snails and crabs, remarried widows and had loose morals. The culture of the poor Vanniyars in the Royapuram and Vannarapettai region of North Madras – their poor hovels, their squalor, irregular baths, immodest attire, wearing of ornaments made of brass, the women addressing the men folk in the singular, etc. – was ridiculed: “they conduct a whole marriage in fifteen rupees”!<sup>35</sup>

The tenor and the trajectory of the debate, if you could call it that, inevitably led to the courts and litigation. Both Nadar journals were sued by the Vanniyars. In April 1924, A. Subramania Nayagar and A. Balasundara Nayagar (the son of the author of *Varuṇa taruppanam*) sued T. Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani and Thirugnanasambanda Chettiar for defamation at the Chief Presidency Magistrate’s Court, Egmore, Chennai. The prefatorial poem by Vijaya Duraiswamy Gramani, written for Thirugnanasambanda Chettiar’s *Vannikku varuṇaṅ* and republished in the February 1924 number of *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, was the subject of dispute. In the hearing on 7 May 1924, Thirugnanasambanda Chettiar apologised but Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani did not appear and the case was adjourned. In the next hearing on 30 May 1924, Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani appeared in court with the issue of *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ* carrying Thirugnanasambanda Chettiar’s apology. This is the version of the events provided by *Vannikula mittiraṅ* which claimed victory.<sup>36</sup>

*Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ* gives a very different story. Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani claimed that he did not at first notice A. Subramania Nayagar’s pamphlet wherein he had drawn attention to the alleged defamatory remarks. Only after the legal notice was served had he consulted a lawyer. The following reply was sent: “My client is not in a position to understand a reference to the February part of *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, which passage you refer to as defamatory to the Vanniya community ...” To further replies, Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani’s lawyer maintained the line of incomprehensibility. I have been unable to find out the outcome of this particular litigation.<sup>37</sup> But suffice it to say that, given the nature of the case, whatever the outcome, each party could claim victory.

A few months later, in January 1925, another case was filed at the Second Presidency Magistrate’s Court in George Town, Madras. The article “Varma vamcattār”, wherein many derogatory comments were made about the poor Vanniyars living in the North Chennai region, was the bone of contention. The author of the article, Sankaralinga Nadar, and

<sup>35</sup> *Nāṭarkula mittiraṅ*, 22 September 1924. See articles by Sankaralinga Nadar and Murugadasan. See also the continuation in the subsequent issue dated 29 September 1924.

<sup>36</sup> *Vannikula mittiraṅ*, ‘Tiruññācampanta ceṭṭiyār maṅṅippu kaṭitam’, June–September 1924.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Policu kōrttum Tiruññācampanta ceṭṭiyārum’, *Kṣattiriya mittiraṅ*, 6,2, October 1924.

S. A. Muthu Nadar, the editor of *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ* which carried it, were sued.<sup>38</sup> Meetings were organised, especially by Vanniyars, to campaign for the case.<sup>39</sup> The case dragged on for many months with frequent adjournments. The hearings were further delayed by the death of S. A. Muthu Nadar's wife. Campaigns were launched in the pages of *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ* to garner financial support for the legal expenses.<sup>40</sup> Two defence committees were formed in Madurai and Chennai by Nadars.<sup>41</sup> The case seems to have stirred up widespread interest in the community. Reports in the newspapers reproduced in *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ* indicate that large crowds gathered in the court.<sup>42</sup> But it was clear that the *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ* was on the defensive.<sup>43</sup> The verdict in the case was finally delivered in early July 1925. The magistrate found the defendants guilty of defamation and imposed a fine of Rs 201. However S. A. Muthu Nadar stated in the court that he would prefer an appeal.

I have not been able to trace any further information on this. The virtual print war between the Vanniyars and Nadars also seems to have come to an end. Interestingly, however, no overt and tangible evidence for past animosity has survived. Even during the 1950s, when a political understanding was reached between Congress, then led by K. Kamaraj (Nadar) and the Vanniyar parties, Commonweal Party and Tamilnadu Toiler's Party, the signs were barely discernable. In the course of my oral histories with intellectuals of the Nadar community, and even some Vanniyar intellectuals, no one was aware of these disputes of the last century. Caste stereotypes of course prevail in the Royapuram region, but apparently these do not draw from this history.

The acceptance by the census authorities of the preferred nomenclature viz., Nadar and Vanniyar in the 1921 census, and the discontinuation of caste as a category in the 1931 census, perhaps put an end to the print war. Further, by the mid-1920s, the radical anti-caste Self-Respect Movement, led by E. V. Ramasami, had begun to take hold of the Nadars;<sup>44</sup> and Ramasami did not mince words when it came to rejecting the caste system as a whole and ridiculing claims to Kshatriya status. For instance, addressing a conference of the 'untouchable' caste of Pallars (Tam.

<sup>38</sup> *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ*, 1 December 1924.

<sup>39</sup> *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ*, 5 January 1925.

<sup>40</sup> *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ*, 9 February 1925.

<sup>41</sup> *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ*, 2 March 1925.

<sup>42</sup> However, S. A. Muthu Nadar states in his unpublished diary (entry dated 11.2.1925) that 100 Nadars and 20 Vanniyars turned up at the court (I am grateful to A. Thiruneelakandan for this reference).

<sup>43</sup> See the letter of Sankaralinga Nadar, one of the defendants, in *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ*, 2 February 1925.

<sup>44</sup> For a rich study of Nadars in the Self-Respect Movement see Rajadurai 1992.

paḷḷar) or Devendrakula Vellalars (Tam. tēvēntirakkula vēḷāḷar) in September 1929, Ramasami was quite forthright in ridiculing the Sanskritising efforts of various castes.

You want to call yourselves Vellalars. Vanniyars want to call themselves Kshatriyas. Chettiyars want to call themselves Vaisyas. What for? All these amounts to only degrading yourselves ... Nadar masses too have taken to Aryan ways by wearing the sacred thread across their chests. When I exhorted them to tear away the sacred thread one friend asked me, “It has taken so long for our struggle to wear the sacred thread succeed and now you are asking us to take it away even before the thread has got dirty?” The desire to call oneself Kshatriya, or Vaisya, or Vellalar and wear the sacred thread only means that there is a caste above one’s own and conceding that that caste is superior.<sup>45</sup>

All this no doubt contributed to the fizzling out of these debates.

## II

Why dig up the past and resurrect pointless debates? Even contemporaneously this issue was raised. With their own axe to grind, both *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* and *Nāṭārakula mittiraṇ* published an open letter by a Vanniyar, S. Packirisami Padaiyachi, a driver from Rangoon, who claimed that he was sending it to the Nadar journals as the Vanniyar journals did not publish it.

Even though there are learned men in our community, they are wasting their time in unwanted affairs and pointless debates. ... When a number of our community men are wallowing in depraved activities, a few from Salem proclaim “I am a Kshatriya, I am Kshatriya” in a manner opposed to truth. We do not have the Kshatriya blood, valour or custom in us; therefore we are not really Kshatriyas. Brahmins have written about our tradition in such terms. It is despicable that we should glory in such meaningless-ness ... Therefore, the present unwanted debates should be spurned and we should work for the benefit of our people.<sup>46</sup>

If this was the view of a member of the community we have a similar position being articulated by an intellectual from outside the two communities. In the recently unearthed diaries of the highly respected Tamil scholar Na. Mu. Venkataswamy Nattar we find the following entry for 10 July 1925.

Three numbers of the monthly *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ* arrived today. ... The Nadars are calling themselves Kshatriyas. Similarly the community of Pallis or Padaiyachis (Tam. paṭaiyācci) too claim to be Kshatriyas. I am neither happy nor

<sup>45</sup> Anaimuthu 1974: III.1607.

<sup>46</sup> *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, 6,1, September 1924 and *Nāṭārakula mittiraṇ*, 3 November 1924.

unhappy by such Kshatriya claims. Let them happily make these claims. But, in my humble opinion, the evidence that they present to call themselves Kshatriyas fly in the face of wisdom and common sense. Further, both these communities call themselves Kshatriyas while denying that to others. The struggle that these have waged for this title is not a little. Whatever has been written by Padaiyachis condemning the Sandror and by Sandror on Padaiyachis evoke disgust. If only they make these claims to increase the prestige of their community and inspire them to uplift rather than to abuse others it would not be objectionable.<sup>47</sup>

On the face of it, of course, Venkataswamy Nattar's position sounds sensible. But when one recollects that he used a similar logic in his work on the history of his own caste, *Kaḷḷar carittiram*, this necessarily sounds hollow.

It is in the very nature of caste as a system that not physical but notional ranking, in a theoretical structure, is at the root of such conflicts.

### III

By the mid-nineteenth century, the British colonial state had launched a massive exercise to collect and organise systematic knowledge about the colonised. The first decennial census of 1871, delayed by about a decade by the uprising of 1857–1858, made a major impact on the way Indians saw their status and rank in the caste order. As Bernard Cohn has pointed out, “Most of the basic treatises on the Indian caste system written during the period 1880 to 1950 was written by men who had important positions ... as census commissioners”.<sup>48</sup> If the colonisers' view was shaped by the census, the census in its turn had an even bigger impact on the rising modern intelligentsia of various castes. The data of early census on caste, organised on the principle of rank within the caste order (‘social precedence’ in the words of Herbert Hope Risley), and even the very nomenclature of the caste itself, created quite a stir among the emerging Western educated elite of the various upwardly mobile castes. In the case of both Vanniyars and Nadars, both contested their designation as Pallis and Shanars respectively. At the time of the very first census itself, Vanniyars produced *Cāṭicankiracāram* to stake their claim for a different nomenclature and a ranking of their preference. Nadars too followed a similar path. However, it was not until 1921 that the change was conceded. By the next census it had even dropped the ranking of castes.

<sup>47</sup> *Nāvalar nāṭṭār tamiḷ uraikaḷ*, Vol. 21, Chennai, 2007: 88.

<sup>48</sup> Cohn 1987: 242–243.

Caste associations proliferated at this time and these were in the forefront of petitioning the government to concede their demands in regard to the census. The texts and the arguments produced and adduced – though ostensibly based on tradition – were anything but that. The information, the categorisation and disciplines that they invoked were deeply inflected by Orientalism.

The first set of authorities that they invoked was Sanskrit texts: *Puruṣasūktas*, the *Dharmaśāstras* (with precedence given to Manu), and various other Puranas. In the case of Tamilnadu, along with these Sanskrit texts, a range of Tamil texts, newly entering the medium of print, were cited. The entire range of Sangam literary texts, and later verse dictionaries / thesaurus or *nikaṇṭus*, was cited. In fact, each caste picked up one or the other *pirapantam* or minor literary works as a text glorifying their caste. (*cilai-eḷupatu* in the case of Vanniyar.) The Tamil and Sanskrit texts often gave very conflicting views, but they were reconciled by intellectual sleights.

We know that, since the late eighteenth century, Orientalists evinced a keen interest in various orthographies. The decipherment of the Ashokan Brahmi script by James Prinsep was undoubtedly a major intellectual achievement which effectively inaugurated the field of epigraphy in India. By the later nineteenth-century stone inscriptions were being systematically collected. In the debates we discussed above we find these caste intellectuals frequently taking recourse to various copper plate grants, stone inscriptions and palm leaf manuscripts. Such pre-modern written artefacts were privileged as historical documents that were assumed to provide unmediated access to the past. Here it is important to underline the new status given to history. Even though history was being taught in schools and colleges at that time, history as a discipline had not yet emerged; and certainly there was no professionalisation of the practice of history. History-writing was still the preserve of antiquarians, crackpots and vicarious nationalists (with a considerable degree of overlap!). To my mind, these caste genealogies used inscriptional material as sources much earlier than any professional historian – it certainly predates the use of epigraphs by P. Sundaram Pillai to mark “some milestones in the history of Tamil literature” and date “the age of Thirugnanasambanda”. Oral history and proverbs were also extensively used.

Palm-leaf manuscripts were the jokers in the caste historians’ pack. Apparently long-lost and mutilated manuscripts were pulled out of nowhere and published. The 1934 edition of the *Vaṅṅiya purāṇam* published by A. Subramania Nayagar is a good example of this. Some caste groups openly commissioned the writing of caste Puranas. The life of

Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai, the prolific nineteenth-century poet, is replete with instances of such commissioning.

Another intellectual discipline that was frequently employed in the exercise of claiming higher caste ranking was etymology. Even though India's long history of linguistic analysis, with pinnacles of achievement such as Panini and *Tolkāppiyam*, was aware of word origins and (as Thomas Trautmann has demonstrated) words were classified as *tatsama*, *tadbhava* and *deśya*, etc. based on origins,<sup>49</sup> the specialisation of etymology concerned with word-roots was a new intellectual method, extensively used and abused in colonial India. Therefore, we need to include folk etymology ("sound etymology is not sound etymology" as the saying goes) within this rubric. In our case, both Nadars and Vanniyars, indulged in a free use of etymology to not only claim higher status for themselves but also to condemn the other to a lower status. Even when their etymology descended to mere wordplay and ingenuity – their analysis of transformation of words over time fly in the face of all established etymological, historical and historical geographical principles – the exalted status of the new discipline itself is not in question. Both sides acknowledged and indulged in it. T. Vijaya Duraisamy Gramani wrote a whole series of articles on *Nāṭār eṇṇum col āṛāycci* (A treatise on the word 'Nadar') in his *Kṣattiriya mittiraṇ*, which was later published as a book. *Nāṭārkula mittiraṇ* also published a series of articles titled *Vanniyar eṇṇum col āṛāycci*, wherein the same etymological method was used to decry Vanniyar claims to Kshatriya-hood.

Lexicons and dictionaries were also extensively cited and contested. Both sides criticised the famous Rottler and Winslow and later dictionaries for wrong word origins and derogatory definitions.

Not only history, but anthropology and ethnography as well were invoked in the disputes over caste ranking. Both sides looked up to colonial ethnographers and Orientalists. James H. Nelson, Gustav Oppert, Eugen Hultsch, Herbert Hope Risley, not to speak of Edgar Thurston, were special favourites. However, it needs to be added that a great amount of selectivity and opportunism was involved. As *Varuṇa taruppaṇam* observed even when it was citing colonial authorities for its own purposes:

When Tolkāppiyam and other texts written thousands of years ago state that the Vellalars are Sudras how can one cite the works of English scholars written 50–60 years ago as authorities?<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Trautmann 2006: 157–161.

<sup>50</sup> Arumuga Nayagar 1907: 370.



The knowledge foundation of the caste histories and the disputes – sources, authorities, epistemes, methods, disciplines – were undoubtedly inflected and mediated in and by colonial discourse. This is by no means an earth shattering revelation but fully borne out by the debates and documented in this article.

#### IV

The debates documented and analysed in this article throw new light on struggles to re-negotiate caste status and ranking in colonial Tamil society. While the much-abused (in both senses of the word) concept of Sanskritisation has its use as a starting point to understand processes for negotiate caste ranking it has to be invoked with a keen awareness of the reality in a specific context. Opposition to claims for a higher ranking need not necessarily come from physically proximate communities but from adjacent castes in the hierarchy, even when they are separated by a wide distance. The re-negotiation of caste ranking, deeply embedded in a colonial discourse, drew from a wide range of sources, both indigenous and foreign. They were mediated by Orientalism and other colonial forms of knowledge.

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