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CRITIQUE

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# THE RIGHT-HAND AND LEFT-HAND DIVISIONS OF MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA — A CRITIQUE

Y. Subbarayalu

The terms *valangai* (Right-hand) and *idangai* (Left-hand) which occur in Tamil inscriptions from the 11th century onwards and also in British records of the 18th-19th centuries are usually considered as denoting two mutually opposing social divisions. Burton Stein, the most recent writer on the problem has given a critical and comprehensive synthesis of all the earlier writings.<sup>1</sup> He has made a very convincing proposition that the two divisions were not fixed social groupings and that they were rather potential formations which acted on occasions as points of polarization for diverse local social groups and castes.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Stein inadvertently accepts the generally prevailing notion that while the *valangai* or Right-hand division comprised only those castes or groups relating to land and agriculture, the *idangai* or Left-hand division comprised the commercial and artisan groups.<sup>3</sup> This notion which was somehow made popular by the Colonial administration and became a stereotype is contradictory to the impressive evidence that has been marshalled by Stein himself.

Drawing from several sources, most of them belonging to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Stein has presented in a table<sup>4</sup> the Right/Left affiliations of some sixty-eight prominent castes in northern Tamil Nadu and the neighbouring Karnataka and Andhra Districts. Only ten out of these 68 castes are designated as Left. Obviously there are so many merchant and artisan castes among the rest who are bracketed in the Right group. In fact Stein has sensed the weakness of his argument and glossed it over as follows:

Certain weavers were also of the [Left] division according to later evidence, though most were of the Right division. In the case of weavers, there appears to be no particular reason for the association with the Left division unless scale of operation and production for the market (rather than for a fixed clientele) was a factor for weavers as it appeared to be for oil producers.<sup>5</sup>

If the inscriptional evidence is checked without any preconceived notions, the "agrarian versus mercantile and craft occupations" explanation for the Right/Left designation is not so appropriate and has to be rejected for some palpable reasons. The first clear reason is the fact that in several Left-hand inscriptions of the 14th and 15th

centuries<sup>6</sup> the leading role is played by the *palli* or *vanniya* caste which was never a commercial or artisan caste during the thousand years of its known history. This caste is first noticed as a martial group in the 11th century serving in the Chola army, and is found to slowly transform itself into a peasant caste within a couple of centuries and it has retained the same status to the present day. Another striking reason is that in several *Ayyavole* trade-guild inscriptions of the 11th to 13th centuries found in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka the leading merchant groups are found to consider themselves as right-hand members.

In the trade-guild inscriptions met with in places like Padaviya, Vahalkada and Viharehinna in Sri Lanka datable to the 11th-12th centuries the term *valangai* is found as part of the title of some members of the merchant groups.<sup>7</sup> A similar trade-guild inscription of the 11th century at Nattam Koyilpatti in Madurai District of Tamil Nadu has the following passage:<sup>8</sup>

The *nattu-chettis* and *danma-chettis* of several *mandalas* and Chempian Senapati-andan, Vaikunda-nadalvan alias *valangai-mikama-viraganga-pillai*, Irajadhiraja-*valangai*-naporpati, etc. among the *virakodiyar* of the 18-*bhumi* ...

The *valangai* attribute found as part of the title segment of the names of the *virakodiyar* is striking. The *virakodiyar* mentioned in this inscription are found in the trade-guild inscriptions of Sri Lanka and in a few inscriptions in Karnataka<sup>9</sup> too. They were the militia and guardsmen of the merchant guild. Actually most of the inscriptions where the *virakodiyar* figure refer to garrisoned towns called *erivirapattinam*.

The foregoing facts obviously would not support a clear equation of the *valangai* with land-based cultivating castes and that of the *idangai* with commercial and artisan castes, at least during the early phase of their history.

## II

From available historical evidence, the origin of the *valangai-idangai* nomenclature can only be traced to the Chola-period military classification. At the earliest the term *valangai* is met with in late 10th century in the records of Rajaraja I (985-1014) who was the first ruler to organize a large army for his imperial expeditions. In those records it is used only as a designation for military regiments.<sup>10</sup> After that in the later half of the 11th century we come across a sort of poll tax called *valangai-idangai magamai*.<sup>11</sup> Even though there is no indication about the groups included in *valangai* and *idangai* in the inscriptions referring to this tax, we may not be wrong to consider

them as the military people. This tax may give us a clue to the fact that by the late 11th century the *idangai* designation had also become functional. Even then only the Right-hand army units are found mentioned conspicuously in a few inscriptions known so far. For instance according to an AD 1073 inscription found in Kolar District of southern Karnataka the Big Right-hand army (*valangai mahasenai*) is said to be present in a big gathering of agriculturists hailing from Chola-mandalam and Jayangondachola-mandalam which form the central territory of the invading Chola king.<sup>12</sup>

Then in the famous *velaikkara* inscription of Polonnaruwa<sup>13</sup> in Sri Lanka, dated in early 12th century, the different sections of the *velaikkara* army are enumerated as: *valangai*, *idangai*, *chirudanam*, *pillaikaldanam*, *vadugar*, *malaiyalar*, *parivarakkondam* and *palakalanai*. Nilakanta Sastri suggested that these names did not denote actually classes of *velaikkara* (army) but only the sources of their recruitment<sup>14</sup>, i.e. the different social classes from which the *velaikkara* soldiers were drawn, "some designated by caste or caste group, others by rank, yet others by race or occupation,...". Obviously the learned scholar considered the designations *valangai* and *idangai* here as the names of caste groups. That is not convincing for the following reason. Ascribing caste status to these groups so early as the beginning of the 12th century is rather farfetched and it amounts to projecting backwards the later developments in society. Either from the Polonnaruwa inscription or from contemporary Chola inscriptions we do not get any evidence, explicit or implicit, to suggest that the above designations were related to anything other than military formation.

It is only in the late 12th and 13th centuries that there is clear manifestation of the caste formation. Of course "caste" is met with as a rudimentary social feature of the Tamil society even in the 9th-10th centuries. A sort of stratification had taken form by the beginning of the 11th century. Two Tanjavur inscriptions<sup>15</sup> of Rajaraja I dated 1014 supply us information relating to the separate quarters respectively for landholders (*ur-irukkai*), artisans (*kammana-ceri*), and the *paraiya* (*parai-ceri*). A long inscription of Virarajendra at Gangaikondacolapuram<sup>16</sup> gives almost similar description of settlements in Tanjavur and Tiruchirappalli Districts about 1068. Castes lower in hierarchy than the Brahmans are also referred to in some records, but in very general terms.<sup>17</sup> This hierarchy was elaborated during the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The military expansion of the Chola empire throughout the early half of the 11th century provided some outlet for the energies of the

martial-natured tribes of the fringe areas. There is evidence to say that the Chola kings began to draw a number of recruits for their army from these tribal communities. Many regiments of bowmen (*villi*) were formed in these outlying areas.<sup>18</sup> As members of the ever victorious military establishment of the imperial Cholas the military people were introduced to the plains' culture and to the opulence of the Chola government. The enormous wealth obtained through plunder and tribute would have naturally been shared by all the fighting people. It has been argued by Karashima that an important factor for the emergence of private landholding was this new wealth imported into the country.<sup>19</sup> A corollary of the same phenomenon was the incorporation of the erstwhile tribal folk into settled communities. In this connection there is an interesting Pandya inscription dated c.1318A.D. from Aduturai, which itself refers to an earlier Chola inscription dated 1122 A.D. The latter mentions the *palli* people as the holders of *kani* (rights of property in land) in many villages in the northern part of the dry zone.<sup>20</sup> It refers to them collectively as *palli-nattar* or *pan-nattar*. The *palli* are a martial people like the *marava*, the *kalla*, etc. Their martial character is clearly brought out by the above inscription. It mentions a money contribution of one *panam* per bow (held by them). The imprecatory passage at the end further stresses that whosoever opposes this decision of the *palli-nattar* would not be considered as a warrior of their group (*nammil oru viran allavaka*). We have here, therefore, a case of once martial people becoming landholders. The term *nattar* suffixed to *palli* (also in the compound form *pan-nattar*) is an indication in this direction. This term was generally used only to denote the corporate bodies of landholders of the micro-level territorial (*nadu*) units. It may therefore be suggested that the designation was being imitated by the *palli* who had by then settled as peasants. Incidentally this inscription gives an interesting information. The record is addressed to the *palli* people of a vast territory (about 10,000 sq. km.), namely that bounded by the Viranarayanan tank on the east, the Pachchai hills on the west, the Kaveri river on the south and the Pennai river on the north. From this we may understand not only the concentration of the *palli people* in the South Arcot District and the adjoining Tiruchirappalli District to the north of the Kaveri but also the social integration over a wide area at this time.

Another martial people who turned peasants in this area are the *surutiman* community. The earliest *surutiman* referred to in an inscription of this area dated 1015 A.D. was a vanguard soldier who gave up his life at the forefront of battlefield of Katakam at the bidding of the king.<sup>21</sup> There is a reference in 1141A.D. to another

*surutiman* being a member of the *nattar* of Urrattur-nadu.<sup>22</sup> The next one referred to in 1150 A.D. is a landholder (*udaiya*) and *nadalvan* (a watchman or ruler of the *nadu*)<sup>23</sup> Big *surutiman* landholders are referred to in inscriptions of early 13th century.<sup>24</sup>

Like the *surutiman*, two other contiguous groups, namely the *nattaman* and the *malaiyaman* also claimed the status of *nattar*. An inscription of 1227 A.D. from Valikandapuram refers to the *nattaman* as the leaders of the *Yadava-kula*, obviously a pastoral community and as the *chittirame-li-periyanadu* (the greater *nadu* or *nattar* with the beautiful plough).<sup>25</sup> The *malaiyaman* is mentioned immediately afterwards. There is some other explicit evidence about the pastoralists becoming landholders. A Srirangam inscription of 1184 A.D. records the assignment of the taxes of an entire village in Valluvappadi-nadu (Musiri Tk., Tiruchirappalli District) to the Srirangam temple by the *sri-gopalas* holding *kani* rights in Valluvappadi-nadu.<sup>26</sup> The signatories in the inscription, all landholders (*udaiyan*) of one or other of about fifty villages of this *nadu*, agree to take the burden of paying (to government) the taxes relating to the donated village. The names of the signatories as well as the designation *sri-gopala* suggest that they were herding group, particularly cowherds.

### III

In the light of the developments in the society noted above, it should be clear that the nature of Right-hand and Left-hand classification could not have been the same over the centuries. Originally being used for military classification, it assumes a sort of social designation in course of time. Only in the late 12th century and 13th century inscriptions the term *idangai* is used as an attribute of certain caste groups.<sup>27</sup> These latter were the above mentioned landholding castes who had emerged out of the erstwhile military and pastoral groups, like the *palli* or *vanniya*, the *surutiman*, the *nattaman*, etc. An A.D. 1218 inscription at Uttattur<sup>28</sup> relating to the solidarity pact of the *idangai* (Left-hand) group refers to the mythical origin of the *surutimans*, their settlements in some five *nadus* and their association with the Left-hand group. They are also called as the “five *nattar*”. The signatories to the solidarity pact of this Left-hand group were only some *surutimans* having the title *nadalvan*.

The Valikandapuram inscription of 1227 A.D. referred to above is again a solidarity pact of the Left-hand communities which included the communities Brahman, *ariya*, *nattaman*, *malaiyaman*, *andanar*, *pannattar*, *vaniya-nagara*, and *kaikkola*. It may be observed here that

the *nattaman* and *malaiyaman* occupy the top positions next only to the Brahman caste (the *ariya* may be a sub-caste). There is an allied, perhaps antecedent, inscription at Varanjuram<sup>29</sup> dated in the same year which is very significant in that it refers to the entry of the *malaiyaman* and the *nattaman* in the Left-hand group and their taking an oath to be the “eyes and hands” of the group and endorsement of the same by the other members including the *andanar*, *akayar*, *niyayattar*, *kaikkolar*, *vanigar*, *pan-nattar* and *saliyar*. The above two inscriptions taken together would show the leading role played by the *nattaman* and the *malaiyaman* in the Left-hand group as the new landholding communities.

To sum up the foregoing evidence, the emergence of new landholding castes out of the older martial-natured, nomadic and pastoral tribes is quite obvious in the peripheral areas of the Chola kingdom during the 12th-13th centuries. The process seems to have been brought about by the military activities of the imperial Cholas from the early eleventh century onwards. Another parallel process was maturity of the caste system itself.<sup>30</sup> Identity of different castes is sharply defined and the different castes are consciously ranked, the landholding castes naturally getting the top ranks. At this juncture the appearance of newer landholding castes must have been resented by the older landholding castes. The solidarity pacts of the Left-hand group in which the new landholding castes played a dominant role can better be explained from this angle, i.e., as a challenge to the privileged position of the traditional landholding castes. This elite character of the dual division, i.e. comprising only the landholders and their close associates, did not seem to continue if we go by the Vijayanagar period evidence.

We get more explicit evidence on the Right/Left groups in the Vijayanagar period in the early half of the 15th century. There are several inscriptions which refer to both the groups together mostly in the context of opposing tax burden. A series of inscriptions dated in the year 1429 A.D. refers to a joint revolt of both the groups against the Vijayanagar governors, their local military leaders (*vanniyas*) and the Brahman and Vellala landlords, for having oppressed them with heavy tax burden and other exploitation. From both direct and circumstantial evidence of these inscriptions it has been argued that the Right and Left groups comprised of all the direct producers, namely the cultivators, artisans, commercial castes and other servicing castes.<sup>31</sup>

It can therefore be argued, as done by the present writer elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> that the *valangai-idangai* classification appeared originally as a military classification, then it turned out to be old



landholding groups (*vellala-nattar*) versus the new landholding groups (*palli-nattar* and others). Still later during the 14th and 15th centuries, in the Vijayanagar period it became a general nomenclature to designate all the direct producers. That is, the *valangai-idangai* designation was flexible in nature and its connotation underwent gradual changes in keeping with the changes in the medieval society of Tamil Nadu. This fact has to be remembered while interpreting the post-Vijayanagar and British evidence of the 18th-19th centuries, which, as noted by Stein, often originated from urban contexts utterly foreign to the Chola age.<sup>33</sup>

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Burton Stein, *The Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (OUP, 1980), ch. V, pp. 173-215.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 180.  
 "The divisions are thus seen not as 'absolute' social entities, for example, as 'super castes' as suggested by the terms 'right-hand castes' and 'left-hand castes', but 'relative' or 'potential' groupings of established local groups. Such aggregate groupings were capable of dealing with extra-local problems beyond the scope and capability of existing locality institutions of the time and capable of being called into existence in response to a variety of problems, including conflicts, requiring extra-local cooperation. At any time and place, the composition of right and left divisions would vary according to the exigent condition which brought them into being, and they would lapse into latency with the passing of that condition."
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 196, 479ff.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 474-77.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
6. *ARE.* (= *Annual Report on Epigraphy*), 1954-55, No. 315 (AD. 1458); *ARE.*, 1910, No. 215 (AD. 1427).
7. A. Velupillai (ed), *Ceylon Tamil Inscriptions*, pt. I (Peradeniya, 1971), pp. 53-57; *Ibid.*, pt. II (1972), pp. 19-20. Also see *Avanam* (Journal of Tamil Nadu Archaeological Society), 9 (1998), pp. 32-39. K. Indrapala, "South Indian Mercantile Communities in Ceylon, c. 950-1250", *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, New series, vol. I (1971), pp. 101-113.
8. *Avanam*, 3 (1993), pp. 35-36.
9. *Epigraphia Carnatica*, V (1976), pp. 112-13.
10. *SII.* (= *South Indian Inscriptions*), II, Introduction, p. 10.
11. *SII.*, III, 57; *SII.*, V, 976; *SII.*, VIII, 4; *SII.*, XVII, 301
12. *Epigraphia Carnatica*, X, Mb.49, 119.
13. S. Parnavitana, 'The Polonnaruva Inscription of Vijayabahu I', *Epigraphia Indica.*, XVIII, pp. 337-38.
14. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, 'A Note on Velaikkara', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. Ceylon Branch*, Vol. 4 (n.s.), 1954, pp. 67-71.
15. *SII.*, II, No. 4-5. Also see Karashima, *South Indian History and Society: Studies from Inscriptions A.D. 850-1800* (OUP., New Delhi, 1984), pp. 46-48.



16. *SII*. IV, No. 529.
17. *SII*. V, No. 1409.
18. *EI*. VII, No. 19(1); *SII*. XVII, No. 204, 249.
19. Noboru Karashima, *op.cit.* pp.27-30.
20. *ARE*. 1913, No. 35. For *kani*, see Karashima, *op.cit.* pp.18ff.
21. *ARE*. 1912, No. 515.
22. *ARE*. 1912, No. 523.
23. *ARE*. 1912, No. 502
24. *ARE*. 1912, Nos. 497, 500.
25. *ARE*. 1943-44, No. 276
26. *SII*. XXIV, No. 136.
27. Here one may broadly concur with the following perceptive, though a bit sweeping, statement of Stein (*op.cit.* p.182):

“One of the most important functions of the *idangai* division was the assimilation of groups to the expanding order of the Chola period. From the tenth to the thirteenth century new tracts of land not previously committed to sedentary agriculture were being brought into the expanding ambience of the Chola agrarian order. Whether by conquest or by the peaceful extension of the Chola agrarian system, people of these new tracts were brought into the dual divisions, and the groups thus included in the dual divisions might be agriculturists who had previously practiced shifting cultivation or they might be artisans ...”
28. *ARE*.1912.No.489.
29. *ARE*. 1940-41, No.184.
30. The idea of caste (*jati*) is explicitly mentioned in the Left-hand inscriptions in contrast to earlier inscriptions. Thus in the Valikandapuram inscription relating to the solidarity pact of the Left-hand groups, the imprecatory passage emphasizes that those members of this group who defy the solidarity pact should be considered as those of low castes, even lower than the caste of their opponents (*maru jatikkum kil jatikkum talvu cheytomam*). According to another inscription dated 1225 the oilmongers (*vaniya-nagaram*) identified themselves as a separate caste (*nammudaiya jati*) (*ARE*. 1938-39, No. 163).
31. N. Karashima, *Towards a New Formation: South Indian Society under Vijayanagar Rule* (OUP, 1992), pp. 141-155.
32. Y. Subbarayalu, ‘The Peasantry of the Tiruchirappalli District from the 13th to 17th centuries’, in N. Karashima (ed.), *Socio-Cultural Change in Villages in Tiruchirappalli District, Tamil Nadu, India*, Pt. I: Pre-Modern Period’, (ILCAA, Tokyo, 1983), pp. 123-31. Also see Y. Subbarayalu, ‘Social Change in Tamil Nadu in the twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries A.D.’, *South Indian History Congress: Proceedings of the II Annual Conference, Trivandrum, 1981* (1982), pp. 138-42.
33. Stein, *op.cit.*, p.470.