

Early Evidence for Caste in South India

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At first glance, caste seems a phenomenon which, if not simple, is at least amenable to explanation and description; yet, as the vast number of writings on the subject and their many different points of view indicate, this is not the case. Rather, caste is a complex group of phenomena that is not only connected with, but which is the basic component of the social organization of most of South Asia. The reason that there is to date no widely accepted theory of its origin, or even a universally accepted description of caste, is, I feel, that it has no single origin and no single form. It varies widely from place to place, group to group, and time to time; it embraces different systems—*varṇa*, religion, occupation, political groupings, wealth—while wholly conforming to none of those systems. The closer one comes to it, the more elusive it is to grasp. If you ask a South Asian what his caste is, his answer will vary depending on the circumstances—he may tell you his *varṇa*, or a very broad but not endogamous group, or a smaller group that exists over a large area, or a tiny group that consists of only a few hundred or thousand people.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of caste in South India in the period from about 100 A.D. to about 700 A.D. This will be done by using sources that, while critically important, have been ignored by anthropologists because they have been unavailable. The reader

will very reasonably ask, “But how can you trace the history of an institution that you yourself have said cannot be satisfactorily defined?” The answer is that tracing the history of caste involves creating a definition of it. Obviously, if one says that caste is simply *varṇa*, then early South Indian sources will be of little use. If, on the other hand, one looks at other features of caste that seem to be more important to how it actually functions—the nature of untouchability, for example—then the early Tamil sources have much to reveal.

The sources that will be used for this study are the eight Tamil anthologies that help comprise what has been called Sangam literature. These consist for the most part of love poems and heroic poems, and have been described in detail elsewhere.¹ Using an index of words to these poems,² I will analyze several key concepts to see just what can be culled from them regarding the existence and nature of caste in pre-Aryan times.

Perhaps the most revealing word in all the poems is *pulai*, which, according to the *Tamil Lexicon*, means baseness, uncleanness, defilement [incurred from contact with a ritually polluting substance or person], evil, animal food, outcaste, and stench. It is clearly cognate with the Dravidian root *pul*, which the DED traces through several languages. Among its meaning in various languages are Kannada *pole* meaning menstrual flow, impurity from childbirth, defilement, Koḍagu *pole*, pollution caused by

¹See George L. Hart, III, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts* (Berkeley, 1975), pp. 161-257 and George L. Hart, III, *Poets of the Tamil Anthologies: Ancient Poems of Love and War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

²All of the words in ancient Tamil literature are listed with their sources in *Index des mots de la littérature tamoule ancienne* (Pondichéry, 1967-70), in three volumes.

menstruation, birth, or death, Tulu *polē*, pollution, defilement, and, far afield, Brahui *pōling*, stain, stain on one's character. Most of the Southern languages have some equivalent for Tamil *pulaiyaṅ*, man of low caste. In early Tamil literature, *pulai* or a derivative is sometimes used as a term of abuse (as *paraiaṅ* is used even today); in *Maṇi*. 13, for example, it is used in scolding a Brahmin who stole a cow from a sacrifice, while in *Kali*. 72.14, a woman uses the term (in the feminine) in abuse to her husband's courtesan. Similar uses include eating meat (*Inṇā* 12.3—a later text; this is a common meaning in later times), and visiting prostitutes (*Tirikaṭu*. 39.1, also a later text).

Before proceeding to discuss the use of *pulaiyaṅ* as an epithet for certain groups, it is necessary to discuss some of these groups and their occupations in ancient Tamil society. The two most prominent musician groups were the Pāṇaṅs and the Kiṇaiyaṅs. Of these, the former would play an instrument like the lute (the *yāl*) and would try to live through the patronage of kings or the patronage of a rich family, whose house they would make auspicious with their songs. The Pāṇaṅ was often a sort of peon for the master of the house, accompanying him places and doing service for him. The Kiṇaiyaṅ seems to have been a bit lower than the Pāṇaṅ. He would beat a small drum called a *kiṇai*, praise the king in the morning or at other times, receiving some reward for that act, and, evidently, he would go from village to village announcing the king's decrees. He was probably the same as the modern *Paraiaṅ*. Another group mentioned occasionally are the *tuṭi* drum players, evidently rather wild types who would also sometimes play during battle. Beyond these, there were groups

of traveling musicians who would go to the courts of kings, play, and receive some recompense. These may have been considered Pāṇaṇ, as they often used the *yāl*. The wife of the Pāṇaṇ was called a Viṛali (from the word *virāḷ*, victory); she would dance and was usually pictured in such erotic terms that Chelliah writes, “The songstress seems to have been quite naked, as otherwise her whole body could not have been described.”³

The term *pulaiyaṇ* or *pulaiṭṭi* is used several times of persons who belong to these and other groups. In Naṛ. 90.3, Kuṛ.330, Akam 43.11 and 387.6, and Puṛam 311.2, *pulaiṭṭi* means a washerwoman. In Naṛ. 77.1 and Puṛam 287.1, it is used of the player of the *tuti* drum. The second of these references is particularly revealing, as it shows that this man was considered low: “O Pulaiyaṇ who beats the *tuti*, O low one (*ilicina*) who [holds] sticks that strike [the drum].” In Naṛ. 347.5, the player of the *taṇṇumai*, the huge drum used to summon people to battle, is said to be a *pulaiyaṇ*; elsewhere, the player of this drum is said to be a Pāṇaṇ. In Kali. 68.19, 85.22, and 95.10, *pulaiyaṇ* refers to a Pāṇaṇ.

There are several uses of *pulaiyaṇ* that need to be discussed at greater length. The first is Kali. 55.19, which describes how a man “gave a wretched look like that of *pulaiyaṇs*.” From this, we may infer that these groups were low, unprivileged, and often indigent—a surmise that, as we will see, is supported by other sources. In *Puṛam* 259.5, cows are said to jump like a *pulaiṭṭi* (female *pulaiyaṇ*) possessed by a god (*muruku*), suggesting that possession is a characteristic of *pulaiyaṇs*. In *Puṛam* 360.19, to stress the horror of death, the poet says that when you are dead, you will have to

³J. V. Chelliah, *Pattupattu* (Madras, 1962), p. 55.

eat the offering of rice and toddy given by the *pulaiyaṅ*. Implicit in this passage is the suggestion that it is repulsive to eat food offered by such a man.

We see, then, that the word *pulai* carries some opprobrium, and that it is used to refer to several groups that are evidently at the bottom of society—washermen, drummers, bards (Pāṇaṅs), a woman who becomes possessed, and the man who officiates at the funeral ceremony. It is now necessary to gain some idea of just what groups were at the bottom of society and what their functions were. Some idea of this is gained by a survey of the use of the word *ili*, to be low, and its derivatives. This word is used to show that someone is contemptible or of low status: in the famous poem that is a dialogue between a humpbacked woman and a dwarf (*Kali*. 94.28), she says, “Is birth as a humpback lower than you?”, while in *Puram* 204.1-2, the poet exclaims, “It is low to beg saying, ‘Give!’, but it is even lower to respond by refusing to give.” In *Akam* 110.16, a girl from a fishing village says to an evidently high-born man that he would not like to eat fish, which is a “low” food, while in *Kali*. 121.20, the fish in a harbor are said to be “low.” This suggests that in ancient times, as now, fishermen were of quite low caste. In *Puram* 82.3, the leather-worker is said to be low, while in *Puram* 170.5, the *tuṭi* drummer is said to be “one of low birth.” Another word that is revealing in this regard is *ilaiyar*, meaning literally “young ones,” but often used to mean “servants,” “those whom one orders.” In *Patir*. 41 at the beginning, wandering musicians are described as *ilaiyar*, while in *Patir*. 51.33, the players of the *taṇṇumai* drum are called *ilaiyar*.

Evidently, low-born people lived largely in separate places in ancient times as now. *Pattinappālai* 75 mentions a *cēri* outside of a city—then, as now, evidently a place where low castes live—where there are pigs and chickens and where fishermen live. *Paripāṭal* 7.31-2 speaks of the *cēri* of the dancers (*ātavar*)—who, as will be seen, were of low caste. *Maturaikkāñci* 342 mentions a “*perumpāṇ irukkai*”—apparently the place where a branch of the Pāṇaṇs (“*perum* means “great”). On the other hand, Brahmins had their own section of town, and in those places, there was no meat, no dogs, and no chickens (*Porunarārruppaṭai* 300; *Perumpāṇārruppaṭai* 297 ff.)

Puram 335, an intriguing poem, speaks of a wilderness in which the only *kuṭis* (an word that evidently can be translated “caste”) were the Tuṭiyaṇ (drummers), the Pāṇaṇs, the Paṛaiyaṇs (drummer” and perhaps the same as the *kiṇai* drummer), and the Kaṭampaṇ (probably a priest of Murugan, as that god wore a garland of *kaṭampu* flowers). The poem further describes the barren area as a place where only various kinds of millet and beans grow, and where the only gods worshipped are (hero) stones erected because heroes fell in battle. This suggests several things. First, it has been seen above that drummers and Pāṇaṇs are of low status. Here, they are associated with a wilderness area that is out of the civilized area marked by rice cultivation, and out of the area to which the Brahmins and others had brought the newer North-Indian gods. It should be noted that this passage distinguishes two different *kuṭis* even though both play the drum (the difference evidently being that the drums are of different kinds). *Porunarārruppaṭai* 50ff. has a similar theme: it describes how the wife of a Pāṇaṇ performs a sacrifice (*kaṭaṇ kalippiya*—the words could also mean

discharges a debt) to the god who lives in the wilderness (*kātu*). *Patir*. 41, at the beginning, has a passage that seems related: it describes how a band of musicians goes, with its instruments, praising god. The commentator Duraicami Pillai remarks that they praise god as they travel so no evil will come from the gods in the wilderness.

The life of some of these low-status groups, especially of the performers, is described often in the poems. They make it clear that many of these people were marginal, existing off the largesse and generosity of the upper classes. *Puram* 375, for example, describes the wretched life of the *kiṇai* drum player: he must enter the *kuṭi* (here, evidently, house or village) of those who live by the plow, beg, and sleep in a corner of a public place. In *Puram* 376, the man who plays the *taṭāri* drum (probably the same as the *kiṇai* player) is said to be extremely poor. *Puram* 164 describes a family of musicians: “Our oven is never used for cooking, its sides are not worn down, toadstools grow on it. My wife is thin from hunger. Every time he sucks on her ugly, milkless breast, its skin withered, its duct closed up, our child sobs.” Two poems, *Porunarārruppaṭai* 284 and *Akam* 196 mention that Pāṇaṅs would catch fish—one supposes if they were unable to make a living as performers.

We are, then, left with a picture of the lower groups in ancient South India as people charged with doing certain tasks—leatherworker, washerman, fisherman, the one who presides at the funeral ceremony, and, most prominently, any of many different kinds of performers. To this we may perhaps add the priest of Murugan. These groups seem to have lived in their own areas and to have been somewhat segregated from upper-class

groups. The performers, at least, lived on the margins of society, and were largely dependent on the largesse of those who were above them. We have yet to consider the occupation of the performers in detail, but several things are clear: they were associated with the wilderness, at least to an extent; and in addition to performing, at least some of them caught fish—also a low and demeaning occupation. Some light is shed on all of this by the use of the word *pulai* to describe many of these groups, for this does not merely imply lowness; it signifies a dangerous and disordered power associated with death, a signification that, given the derivatives of the *pulai* in other Dravidian languages, must be ancient indeed. Each of these groups is somehow associated with this power: the leatherworker works with dead cows; the washerman cleans clothes stained with menstrual blood (a meaning associated with *pulai* in Kannada and Koḍagu); the fisherman kills fish; drummers and other performers play instruments that are covered with skin; and performers are associated with the wilderness, which in Tamil has always been a place of death (*kāṭu* means both “wilderness” and “burning ground”, “burning ghat”). The ancient Tamil poems are rich with material about the different kinds of performers for two quite logical reasons: first, the poems, though written by literate men who were for the most part high-born, were imitations of the productions of low-status performers; and second, these performers performed tasks integral to the proper functioning of society. We may divide these performers into four broad groups: the Pāṇaṅ, who played a lute-like instrument called the *yāl*; the *kiṇai* drummers, who played a drum of that name and seem to have been ancestors of modern pariahs (Paraiyaṅ, a word that means “drummers”);

the *tuṭi* drummers; and those groups with various names (most commonly, Vayiriyaṅs), who traveled in troupes and gave performances all together.

The Pāṇaṅ is found in several situations: as a fisherman, as one of the four groups that lives in a poor area, playing the *taṅṅumai* drum (Akam 106, Naṟ. 310), living in the house of rich people and singing to create an auspicious atmosphere (Aiṅ. 407, 410; Akam 214), standing over a man wounded in battle and playing his lute to protect him (Puṟam 281, 285), and serving as a servant for the man of the house—usually, in the poems, to take messages from the hero to his lover or courtesan. Pāṇaṅs are still found in Kerala and Orissa, where they are low-caste musicians.⁴ Women of the Pāṇaṅ caste were called Viṟalis and were dancers and performers.

The *kiṇai* drummer seems to have been of lower status than the Pāṇaṅ—we do not encounter him in the houses of the upper classes, and indeed, as seen above, if he visited such houses, he did not sleep in them. The end of the *Puṟanānūru* consists of poems that are placed in the mouths of *kiṇai* drummers. Most of these describe how the drummer would come to the place of the king at dawn and, staying outside—once again, it appears he was not supposed to enter—sing of the king and his ancestors. In most of these poems, the king is delighted with the singing of the drummer and gives him wonderful gifts (such as an elephant—one wonders what such a man would have done with an elephant), clothes him in fine garments, and feeds him the most elaborate and subtle food. Drummers would often attach themselves to a particular king, who no doubt patronized them: Puṟam 384 begins “We are the drummers [*kiṇaiyēm*] of the king of

⁴D.E.D. 3351.

Karampaṇūr” (see also *Puṛam* 395 and 396). The singing of the drummer was felt to increase the royal aura and power of the king, for in *Puṛam* 382, a *kiṇai* player exclaims, “I’ll sing your victorious chariot in the courts of others so your enemies tremble every time they hear, just as with every stroke the little stick, its subtle sound sharp, brought down on the eye [of the drum], quivers,” while *Patir*. 75 says that the players of the *Paṛai* drum caused the enemy’s defeat. The *kiṇai* drum was thought to actually possess a supernatural power: in *Puṛam* 399, a drummer is made to say, “I went, cleaned by strong black stick, tied up my *kiṇai*, played it.... I didn’t worship the god who keeps food away....” —the god, evidently, who was supposed to reside in the drum. The *kiṇai* drum was played during an execution (*Puṛam* 78.12), thus clearly linking it to death and the containment of the dangerous forces unleashed upon a death. The ancient player of the *paṛai* may have announced news to the people, as he did in later times, for in *Patir*. 22.98, the *paṛai* is said to be beaten to protect from a flood—a reference that Duraicami Pillai says means that the drum summoned the farmers.

The *tuti* drummer, as has been seen, was different from the *kiṇai* player. Like other drummers, he played during battle, and his drum is called the raft by which the king crossed over the enemy flood of arrows (*Puṛam* 260; see also *Nar*. 77.1). In several poems, it appears that the *Tuṭiyaṅ* is associated with the wilderness rather than the great rice-growing areas near rivers. *Puṛam* 170.5 ff. describes the land of *Piṭṭaṅ* as a mountain with hunters, where a *tuti* beaten by a man of low birth, his strong hand getting red, resounds with the owl on the high mountain where

a tiger sleeps, while *Akam* 261 describes the “wild rhythms of *tuṭi* drums from forest villages [inhabited by] drunken bowmen,” and *Akam* 372.12 says that *tuṭis* are beaten as men steal a herd of cows. The *tuṭi* was beaten to some kinds of dancing, probably involving possession. In *Pari.* 21.19, a *Viṛali* dances: “as intoxication from the liquor interferes with her, lifting her arms, moving to the *tuṭi*, as the pearls in her anklets jingle” (see also *Pari.* 21.60, 21.64, 22.42).

What can we make of these performers and their obvious association with the lowest groups (who have become the Harijans of modern times)? Why should drummers, lute-players, and other performers be associated with washermen, leather-workers, and others by being branded “of low birth” or “*pulaiyaṅs*”? The answer lies in the most basic elements of the world-view of the ancient Tamils, a view that has continued until today in many of its most important facets. The core of this belief system is that sacred power may exist in one of two forms: controlled and auspicious, or uncontrolled and inauspicious. Natural power belongs to this second category, and much of the energy of the society goes into controlling this natural power and making it auspicious. Indeed, there is no power that is auspicious unless it is carefully controlled and ordered; thus, there is need for many social institutions that perform this function of ordering dangerous power.

The most important and basic of these institutions is the king. As he is at the very top of society, one might expect him to share some of the characteristics with others at the top in later times—that he would be a vegetarian, careful to control his contact with low castes, abstaining from alcohol, scrupulously avoiding pollution and dead things. Instead, the old

poems show us kings who ate all sorts of meat, drank what seem to have been huge quantities of alcohol every day, spent much time fighting battles and using bloody weapons smeared with the fat of enemies, and constantly surrounded by the lowest castes, whom they would endeavor to feed and gratify. At the same time, the poems make it clear that the order of the world depends very much on the king—his umbrella, for example, is said to emit moonlight that shields all in his kingdom from the sunlight of catastrophe (*Puram* 35, 60). In the *Cilappatikāram*, which is only a few centuries after the earliest poems, the entire kingdom is consumed by the disordered power of a widow whose husband has been unjustly executed—thus causing the king’s power to be disordered and fail.

The king can be seen as a sort of massive converter of power: he is supplied with disordered and dangerous power, and, with the proper ceremonies and institutions, he converts that dangerous power to its ordered and auspicious analogue, thus keeping his land in a flourishing condition. This explains one of the most common similes in the early war poems: the comparison of the process of war to agriculture. The enemy army is watered with showers of arrows, then cut down like grain; their bodies are heaped up like haystacks; then their bodies are scattered and trampled with elephants just as the grain is scattered and threshed by the tread of buffaloes. The most unimaginable scenes of death and horror are, like the process of sowing and harvest, the source of future fertility and prosperity. All of Tamil literature is filled with gory scenes of the battlefield whose purpose is to glorify the king. While Sanskrit literature also contains such passages, they are decidedly less common and less gory than their Tamil counterparts.

It is as if the Sanskrit works wished to show the king's prowess in battle by describing the enemy dead, while for the Tamils, the blood and gore of the battlefield are an indispensable component of the king's power and aura. A good example is Puṛam 19, where the king makes even Death (Kūrruvaṅ) ashamed:

Surrounded by the roaring seas,
this dense earth has a place, Talaiyālankāṇam,
where Tamils clashed.
There you showed that lives are many,
Death is one,
Celiyaṅ of the conquering spear....
Now on that field, women of ancient houses
weep with melting hearts and they say,
“Like a flock of little birds resting together on a hill,
arrows have pierced the mortally wounded elephant.
Cut off, its strong hollow trunk and mouth
roll on the ground like a plow.
That is how with raised swords they won the battle.
Now our sons, the hair still sparse on their faces,
lie dead with our husbands
and we have a victory.”
Death himself is ashamed and feels pity
on that dreadful field
where you conquered the strength of the seven.

As I have pointed out, the king had many accoutrements whose purpose was to enhance his power—his umbrella, his tutelary tree, his ornaments.⁵ By far the most important is the *muracu*, the royal drum, which is supposed to actually confer the title to the kingdom. *Puram* 50 describes graphically how important the drum was supposed to be. In it, a poet (probably a low-caste bard, though the colophon says it is the poet who wrote the poem himself) is supposed to have been wandering about exhausted and hungry. He saw a house, went in, and was amazed to see a flower-covered bed in the middle of the place. As no one else was around, he climbed on the bed and rested. Unfortunately, he was lying on the bed of the royal *muracu*, which had been taken out to be given a bath:

Its black sides glisten,
long straps fastened to them faultlessly.
It shines with a garland
woven of long, full peacock feathers,
blue-sapphire dark,
with bright spots,
and is splendid with golden shoots of *uḷiñai*.
Such is the royal drum, hungry for blood.
Before they brought it back from its bath
without knowing I climbed on to its bed
and lay on the covering of soft flowers
that was like a froth of oil poured down.
Yet you were not angry,

⁵Hart, *Poems*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-18.

you did not use your sharp sword.

Surely that was enough for all of the Tamil lands to learn of it.

But you did not stop there.

You came up to me,

you raised your strong arm, as big around as a concert drum;

you fanned me

and made me cool.

Mighty lord, you must have done these things

because you know that except for those

whose fame is spread across the broad earth

no one has a place for long in the high world of paradise.

In *Patir*. 17.6, men sacrifice to the great drum (*viyaṅ paṇai*, i.e. the *muracu*) after winning a victory. In *Patir*. 56, the king is said not to be skilled at dancing before the concert drums of the *Kōṭiyaṅs*—low-caste performers—but rather at dancing on the battlefield where the *muracu* sounds. *Patir*. 76.9 speaks of a king who waged war so the sticks of the *muracu* broke (presumably because it was played so fiercely). The connection of the *muracu* with death and the wilderness is illustrated by two facts: the drum was made of the *kāval maram* (protected tree—see below) of an enemy (*Patir*. 17.6) and from the skin of a bull that defeated another bull in a fight (*Puṛam* 288). The most intriguing—and mysterious—reference to this drum is *Patir*. 30.32 ff.: “Your drum, king, beats with a roaring voice for dividing the fine rice (*peruñcōru*) together with other music, and the voices of warriors yearning for war after destroying in the great battle shake the earth like thunder...as kites with black-eyed crows eat the sacrifice

[*pali*—Sanskrit *bali*], while, amazingly, ants do not—the great sacrifice with clear liquor and blood, as black-eyed demon girls clasp their hands and tremble [and, according to Swaminathaier, refuse to eat the sacrifice] at that *piṅṭam* [ball of sacrificial food] hard to get raised by the high one [*uyarntōṇ*] to supplicate the god [in the drum, according to the old commentary] wont to be hard in his might with mantras [*mantiram*] roaring [i.e. shouted] out.”

This intriguing passage shows graphically how important the drum was and how and why it was supposed to be efficacious. Clearly, the most important element connected with the drum was the god—or spirit—who was supposed to inhabit it, and who had to be kept in the drum and made happy with blood and liquor sacrifice. The ball of food offered to the god was so terrible that—if Swaminathaier is right—even demon girls, who were wont to eat the flesh of the dead, would refuse it. The identity of the “high one” is a mystery. The old commentator says nothing, but Swaminathaier suggests that it means “he who worships the god that lives in the drum.” One of the modern subdivisions of the Paraiyaṅ caste is names “Muracu,”⁶ and it seems possible that this is a very ancient division. If so, the “high one” may mean “the one who is high in respect to other Paraiyaṅs and has the office of beating and taking care of the *muracu*.” Alternatively, it could mean a Brahmin—something that appears plausible when one considers that Brahmins are found in the poems presiding at the war sacrifice, in which the blood and intestines of dead enemies were symbolically cooked up (*Puram* 126), and at a rite in which a king who died in bed was

⁶Edgar T. Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras, 1909), VI:80.

cut with a sword to make it appear that he had been killed in battle so that he could go to the Tamil Valhalla (*Puṛam* 93). The problem with this is that Brahmins are generally called *Antaṇaṅs* and *Pārppāṅs*, not “high ones.” It seems most likely, then, that the “high one” means a drummer whose status is high relative to the other drummers.

Another important source of the king’s strength was his “protected tree” (*kāval maram* or *kaṭi maram*), a tree that could be one of several kinds, and which was guarded by the king’s men from any harm. One of the first acts of a victorious enemy was to cut down his rival’s protected tree. Its importance to the king is shown dramatically by the incident in which King *Nanṇaṅ* had a girl executed who unwittingly ate a mango from his tree while bathing (*Kuṛ.* 292). The source of power of this tree seems clear enough: first, it is a cosmic tree, that connects heaven and earth, and thus the source of otherworldly power for the king;⁷ and second, it belongs to the forest (*kāṭu*), the realm of disordered and dangerous power.

A related item associated with the king was his staff or wand (*kōl*), which was supposed to bend if his rule became unjust and he no longer was able to protect his kingdom properly (*Cil.* 16.216). Like the *kāval maram*, this was ultimately a world tree, and showed the king’s connection with the forest. This is shown by another performing group that also used a staff: the *Akavunaṅs*, probably a group of the *Paṛaiyaṅs* (as both played the *kiṇai*⁸), whose wand was called *piṛappuṇarttuṅkōl*—“the stick that gives knowledge of the future.” These were “carefully taken and cut in a little

⁷Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland, 1967), *passim*.

⁸The *Tamil Lexicon*, however, says that the *Akavuna*’s were a branch of the *Pā*^*a*~ caste.

forest of bamboo” (*Akam* 97), a fact that shows that they derived some of their magical power through association with the forest. One of the more intriguing duties of the Akavunaṅ was to hold his stick and praise the field of battle.

It remains to sum up the functions of the lowest castes and relate show how they were important to the king. The role of groups “of low birth” in ancient Tamilnad was to control, or order, dangerous power. As in many archaic societies,⁹ the world was thought to be inhabited by hosts of spirits of the dead who were potentially dangerous and had somehow to be kept away or kept under control. Yet for the Tamils, this idea of “spirits” had undergone development and extension: the whole realm of spirits and death was associated with the notion of a power of great potency that could exist in an ordered or disordered state. This power was thought to inhere in certain objects, where its nature changed from time to time. The most obvious example is woman: if she was married and in an auspicious state, her power could keep her husband from harm.¹⁰ But if she were a widow, she would have to undertake the harshest asceticism, or even take her own life in suttee. When she was menstruous—marked by the uncontrolled discharge of the life substance, a discharge that was a sign itself of failed fertility—then she was dangerous and had to be restricted.¹¹ It is noteworthy

⁹In *The Andaman Islanders* (New York, 1964), p. 136 ff., for example, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown relates how the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands believe in supernatural beings, all of whom are the spirits of dead people. These spirits are believed to be harmful, and care is taken to avoid them and to propitiate them.

¹⁰For details on this matter, see George L. Hart, III, "Woman and the Sacred in Ancient Tamilnad" (*Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2 (Feb., 1973)). See also Hart, *Poems, op. cit.*, p. 226.

¹¹Though the segregation of women during their menstrual periods must have been universal in South India during the time of the anthologies (as it is found in all South Indian

that the poems speak of women as actually having an *aṇaṅku*—spirit or magic power—in their breasts.

The “low-born groups” had an inborn ability to deal with dangerous power, whether in the form of dead spirits or just dangerous power.¹² We find the washerman dealing with clothes polluted with menstuous blood and dancing in a frenzy—clearly brought on by being possessed by a spirit. We find the *kiṇai* drummer playing an instrument made of dead skin, but also an instrument that was apparently thought to house some sort of spirit. The same holds true for the most important of the ancient Tamil drums, the king’s *muracu*: it was made of material that was highly charged, and at the same time it housed a spirit that had to be propitiated with blood, liquor, and some sort of unspeakable offering.

We can now understand why the low-born groups in ancient Tamilnad are distinguished by being performers. Richard Frasca, who has studied Terukkūttu (literally “street drama”) in modern times, has remarked that the boundary between performance and ritual is so thin as to be nonexistent among these groups that perform this drama. During virtually every performance, at least one of the principal actors becomes possessed.¹³ One is reminded of the dramatic re-enactment of mythical events among archaic

cultures today and in medieval times), there is only one reference to this in Sangam literature that I have found: in *Puram* 299, the conduct of skittish horses who retreat in terror in battle is compared that of women "who do not touch dishes" (i.e. are menstuous).

¹²One of the finest modern writers, L. C. Rāmāmirutām, has written a novel, *Putra* (Madras, 1965), in which a curse inadvertently uttered by a mother to her daughter comes to life and pursues the daughter. Clearly, the curse is a kind of spirit -- modeled on the dead spirits that are thought to haunt the wilderness in Tamilnad.

¹³Richard Frasca is writing in detail on this fascinating subject in his still unfinished dissertation on Terukkūttu, a form of Tamil folk drama. I am indebted to him for information and insight on this subject.

peoples, when, according to Eliade, the participants in the drama/ritual actually go back to the primeval time in which the myth they are re-enacting occurred, and when the participants become in some sense identical with the original gods and demons of the myth.¹⁴ In the same way, in the Terukkūttu, the performer who acts out Du'ṣāsana pulling off Draupadṣ's sari often becomes possessed by the spirit of that great but malevolent hero.¹⁵

There is no reason to suppose that performance in ancient Tamilnad was any different—indeed, the poems show that the low-caste performers often became possessed and danced in a frenzied manner. If, then, we return to the king as a sort of dynamic engine who transmutes inauspicious, disordered power to its ordered, benevolent analogue, it becomes apparent that a primary source of this power was the low-caste performers who were attached to him. It also becomes apparent why the generosity of the king is stressed so strongly: as the king depends upon the performers for his power, they depend on him for their livelihood. Indeed, *Patir*. 58.1, “Let Virālis dance, let suppliants sing,” suggests that all supplicants who approached the king were low-caste performers (as elsewhere the word “sing” is used almost exclusively of such people).

¹⁴See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, 1959).

¹⁵There is, I believe, a direct link between such performances as Terukkūttu that involve possession and modern Tamil movies, which attempt, more than any other cinematic tradition I know of, to overwhelm the viewer with extreme emotions. It is the most violent and emotional portions of traditional drama that evoke possession; it seems to me that Tamil movies owe rather a lot to this heritage (Richard Frasca points out that the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M. G. Ramachandran, began his career -- which ultimately made him the most popular movie star in Tamil Nadu -- as an actor in professional drama based on Terukkūttu).

And yet, I believe that it would be wrong to speak of the performers as the actual “source” of the king’s power. This is because the spirits of dead performers do not appear to have been dangerous in the same way as those of two other groups: warriors (and especially kings) who died in battle, and high-born women who committed suttee (as shown by the *Cilappatikāram*). Both of these groups are distinguished by the fact that hero stones were erected to house their spirits and were propitiated with blood and liquor, something that does not appear to have been true of the performers. Woman, and especially a young woman who was still sexually attractive, was thought to be an actual source of power; thus, she was able to preserve her husband. Similarly, the king was a source of power that enabled those under him to kill in battle without being endangered by the spirits of those killed. When he killed, the warrior also became a source of power. On the other hand, the performers and other low groups seems to have been basically controllers and receptacles of power from other sources: their power came from outside themselves. They became charged with it, but it was not essentially that of their own spirit or nature. What distinguished them was the ability to deal with this power, to contain it, and to redirect it without being destroyed by it and without allowing it to go out of control.

This distinction can be seen in another way. Those whose spirits had real power—kings, young women, warriors in battle—were actually able to change the nature of power from inauspicious to auspicious (though they had to observe many restrictions in so doing). The king’s role in war is an obvious example of this, as is the woman’s ability to channel her fertility into benevolent channels. Similarly, the warrior in battle takes the death

around him and transmutes it into a force that is benevolent for society—but he has this power only so long as he is fighting under a king. Thus, we find hero stones to kings who did not die in battle, but, to my knowledge, none to warriors who died in bed. On the other hand, the low-born person could contain disordered and inauspicious power, he could keep it within bounds by beating his drum or playing his other ordering instruments, he could summon it by becoming possessed (unlike the king, who never appears to have become possessed), but he could not change its basic nature; hence, unlike the king, his nature was essentially disordered and dangerous. He was, in effect, someone who could invoke and contain disordered forces, but who could not metamorphose them into something different. This is why the performers worked in symbiosis with the king: the king had need of the forces that the performers could summon; they fed his nature and made him a proper king, able to lead an army and kill in battle. But only the king could transmute those forces into the beneficial aura that kept disaster away from his kingdom. It is worth noting that one poem shows clearly that performers did not fight. One class of performers is called *porunaṅ*, a word that may also mean “fighter.” In *Puram* 386, to indicate that *porunaṅ* means the performer, the poet has his bards say, “We are the Porunaṅs who don’t fight.” Rather, the function of the performers in battle was to invoke and supply the disordered power that was transmuted by the king and the warriors into something benevolent—hence, the agricultural war imagery.

The ability of the lower castes to invoke and control power was related to their low status, which placed them outside of society proper.

They were not supposed to be sources of auspicious power for society, and so there was no danger if they came into intimate contact with disordered power. It seems likely to me that it is their lack of power—of the auspicious power that maintains society, at any rate—that allowed them to deal with disordered power, which they could control and isolate, but not transform. Of course, this is to see the matter from the perspective of the higher castes. Obviously, the lower castes themselves felt that the power they dealt with was dangerous and had to be carefully controlled—hence the plethora of untouchable castes, each with the fitness to do a certain task. It is likely that some of the features of society in general were mirrored within the lowest communities—groups with higher status, a king figure who could transmute power, the importance of women (even though they were not as carefully controlled as the higher-caste women). But from the point of view of the highest castes, the untouchables were outside of society, and their function was to deal with dangerous power and forces and to supply disordered power to the king.

Up to now, we have dealt almost entirely with the lowest groups in the society. Obviously, it is necessary to consider the other groups if we are to gain a better idea of the social structure and the nature of caste (if it existed) of ancient Tamilnad. Fortunately, the characters of the Akam poems are drawn mostly from the upper strata of society, and it is possible to make a few observations, though our knowledge is far more limited than it is with regard to the performing castes.

The heroine of the love poems is generally quite well-off. She lives in a large, guarded house (*Akam* 224); her husband drives a chariot and

sometimes goes off to war, where he fights for the king (*Akam* 24). In addition to her real mother (*narṛāy*), she is watched over by a foster mother (*cevilittāy*), who was her wet nurse when she was young and is obviously of a much lower social station. Her best friend (*tōli*) is conventionally her foster mother's daughter, who sometimes arranges her meetings with her lover. Of course, the poems often describe her illicit meeting with her lover, or sometimes her elopement with him—making it appear that love marriages were the norm. In two poems (*Kur.* 40 and 229), however, it is apparent that people often married their relatives—a practice that, given the fact it is now spread all over Dravidian India—must have been widespread. Elsewhere, it is apparent that a marriage normally could not take place without the parents' consent (*Ain.* 228, 230; *Kur.* 276), and that the man often gave a bride price (*Nar.* 234; *Puram* 343). The alternative to receiving the parents' permission was to elope through the wilderness undergoing all sorts of hardship. One poem (*Kur.* 276) suggests that the king could overrule the parents who were opposed and allow a man to marry a woman, something that would fit in with the king as keeper of the order of the society. *Akam* 280 paints an intriguing picture of a man who wants to marry a girl from another community:

Like gold piled up,
many flowers of bright-clustered *cerunti*
covered her hair
as she played, kicking at the crabs
on the shore heaped high with thick sand,
and then rested.

I know that even if I gave many jewels and great wealth
I could not have that girl whose bangles are lovely.
But if I were to come here to live
so that her father could know me,
if I were to harvest the salt on the shore of the great waters
[with him,
ride out on a raft with him to the deep sea,
obey him, follow him, be with him,
then perhaps he would be fair
and give her to me,
that fisherman from a harbor with a lovely grove,
where they take fat pearls from the spreading waves
and divide them on the broad shore humming with dragonflies.

Obviously it was not common for people to marry outside their community.

It appears that upper-caste women were treated differently from their low-caste counterparts, as is the case today. In *Akam* 7, the foster mother talks to her daughter, telling her that she has come of age and must now stay inside the house, not roaming around the town. The poems that describe the upper-class married heroine always describe her inside her house, often waiting for her husband to return (e.g. *Akam* 224). On the other hand, we have seen above how the *Virali*, often unaccompanied by her husband, would appear in the court of a king wearing almost nothing.

So far, we have said almost nothing of Brahmins, who are often considered an essential part of the caste system. It is true that Brahmins had entered South India by the time of the Tamil anthologies; however, it is

possible to deduce the state of the society before they appeared from the poems, for their presence had not yet fundamentally altered the older structures of the culture. Before considering the role of the Brahmins, it is necessary to answer one crucial question: did the Tamils have caste before Brahmins came, and what was its nature? Then we can consider the changes brought about by the Brahmins.

There can be little question that the major characteristics associated with caste were present in ancient Tamilnad. There were groups who were said to be “of low birth” and tainted by dangerous substances (*pulai*). These groups—and there were many of them—usually had their own quarters of villages or cities and their own occupations. They tended to be quite poor, like the their counterparts today. They were intimately connected with dangerous power and, hence, at least some of them were closely associated with the king. On the other hand, groups from the upper strata were, as today, restricted in their interaction with the lowest castes: they lived in different areas and did not eat food prepared by *pulaiyans*. There existed also, as today, a broad area of middle groups who were not “of low birth,” yet who did not belong to the highest groups either. These included such communities as cowherds, carpenters, smiths, potters, chariot drivers, and mahouts. As today, the social life of a person seems to have been largely determined by the group to which he belonged, and it was not easy for someone to switch his group. On the other hand, caste does not seem to have been as regimented and organized as it became in later times.¹⁶ The

¹⁶In *The Wonder That Was India* (New York, 1959), p. 148), A. L. Basham writes, "It was only in late medieval times that it was finally recognized that exogamy and sharing meals with other classes were quite impossible for respectable people."

poems apparently show a freer association between low and high communities than was true in medieval South India—for example, a Pāṇṇ could stay in the house of a man of high birth. On the other hand, it appears that the *kiṇai* drum player, who was lower in status than the Pāṇṇ, was not allowed to stay in the houses of high-born people.

If one uses purely economic criteria, then the high position and influence of the Brahmins in later times must be mysterious, for it is not clear that they had any tangible economic commodity or skill to offer. Their position in North India was largely based on their ability to manipulate sacred power, to keep the society in which they lived prosperous through the extraordinarily elaborate and impressive rites they developed in the period of the *Brāhmaṇas*. When some of these northern Brahmins first came to South India—we cannot know exactly why they came, or when, though it must have been around 300 B.C.—they found a system quite foreign to them. In North India, they had possessed high status as the foremost possessors and manipulators of magic power: they had shared power with the royal class from the earliest times. In the South, they encountered a system where the king served to transform power that he got largely through the lowest groups in the society, like the Pāṇṇs and the *kiṇai* drum players. In the north, for the Brahmins, purity was power, while in the south, the opposite was, in some sense at least, the case.

The course that these newcomers to South India must take if they wished to retain the privileged position they had in North India was clear: they must be patronized by the most powerful institution in the society (as they had been in the North)—the king. For this purpose, they could offer

to the king their whole tradition of sacrifice and magic, already developed for almost a millenium and extremely impressive. Like his North Indian counterpart, the Tamil king could receive power and other-worldly sanction through the rites of the Brahmins, who, in turn, would expect to be supported and rewarded. The evidence is that the Tamil kings rushed to avail themselves of this new source of status and power. One king, for example, took the name Irāyacūyavēṭṭa Perunarkillī—Perunarkillī who sacrificed the Rājasūya [sacrifice]. Yet, the Brahmins must have been faced with a difficult problem: the native class upon whom the king depended for his sacred power and aura were despised and kept outside of the bounds of society proper. How were the Brahmins to avoid being identified with this class? The answer was to invoke the system they had brought with them from North India: the power to which they had access was not the disordered and dangerous power for which the untouchables were conduits, power that had to be transformed by the king into an ordered and auspicious form. Rather, the power they controlled was already pure and auspicious. They might not be able to replace the low-caste performers, from whom the Tamil kings drew sustenance; but they could supplement them by offering yet another source and form of power from whom the king might draw his royal aura.

Beyond this, the Brahmins kept the notion that their power was connected with their high status and their purity. Indeed, their power was ordered and had to be carefully separated from the disordered and dangerous forces that the untouchable commanded. Thus we find Brahmins surpassing all the other high classes in avoiding any taint of dangerous forces. Already

in the Sangam poems, Brahmins were almost certainly vegetarians (*Perum.* 304-310; *Kur.* 167), and would not allow dogs or chickens into their villages (*Perum.* 297; *Kur.* 277). It is interesting that, while the continual tonsure of widows appears to have been a feature of the upper classes of Dravidian society,¹⁷ it is today found in Tamilnad almost exclusively among certain kinds of Brahmins.

The position of the Brahmins becomes clearer when we consider reasons why the untouchables were excluded from much participation in the society. The untouchables had access to dangerous power in its most dangerous and disordered form. They had the ability to deal with this power, to absorb it, to contain it, and hence to insure that the rest of society could be protected from it. One of their tasks involved funneling the power to the king, who was able to transmute it into its auspicious and beneficent analogue. The king, for his part, was a source of ordered power for his whole land. Brahmins, it is true, were in some ways like the untouchables: they were receptacles of power. But unlike their low-caste counterparts, their power was viewed as ordered and benevolent. This view of the Brahmins' power was not something new in Tamilnad; it goes all the way back to the times of the *Rg Veda*, when the rituals of the Brahmins were seen as upholding the society.

What was new and revolutionary about the Brahmins is just this concept: that, like the king, they could be sources of auspicious power. This means that they were equal to the king in prestige and importance, or, indeed, even superior to him, for their power was independent of the low

¹⁷Hart, *Poems, op. cit.*, p. 115-116.

castes and disordered power. Thus in *Puram* 166, a Brahmin is treated exactly like a king by a poet who praises him for his generosity and orthodoxy. Even the king had to defer to the Brahmin, for in *Patir*. 63.1, a poet says to a king, “you do not serve except to Brahmins.” All of the poems show Brahmins receiving honor and respect. *Puram* 362, addressed to Brahmins, shows more of the new attitude with which Brahmins were received: “Hear the voice of [the drums announcing an] attack! It has nothing to do with the four Vedas, for it is not concerned with kindness. It has nothing to do with *dharma* [Tamil *aram*], for it is concerned with *artha* [Tamil *porul*].”

War was endemic to the indigenous society of the ancient Tamils. Not only was war against one’s neighbors necessary for survival; fighting was felt to be the indispensable source for the power of a king to hold his land in an ordered and governable condition. Unfortunately, the land was divided up into many many *nāṭus*, small kingdoms that Stein has termed “nuclear areas.” No matter how strong a king might become, he could not supplant all the warlords and kings from neighboring *nāṭus*, who would rise up and overthrow him at the least sign of weakness on his part. Indeed, the ancient poems show that the king would not attempt actually to annex and govern neighboring areas; he would demand tribute from them instead. This system, of course, made the tenure of any king, no matter how great, unsure and unstable.

The Brahmins supplied a solution of sorts to this instability. By the time of the Pallavas, the Tamil kings knew of the great Gupta empire in the North, an empire that had much more internal cohesion and stability than

any empire in the Tamil country. They also knew that this empire emphasized Hinduism—the status of Brahmins, Sanskrit, and orthodoxy. Obviously, it was to their advantage to establish a similar system in the South, so that their regime could be better anchored and more stable than others in Tamilnad. The fact that the Pallavas were a new force in South India must have had some bearing on their mentality as well. In any event, the Brahmins and the new gods they brought (especially Śiva¹⁸) provided a means to change the system: the warlords and petty kings of the *nāṭus* could be replaced by Brahmins and the new gods, who were modeled on kings. Like the kings, Brahmins were a source of order and sacred power; unlike them, their power did not depend upon the endemic warfare that had made the society so unstable in the centuries of the Sangam poems.¹⁹

On the other hand, the Brahmins could not totally do away with the ancient notions regarding power and its sources. There are proverbs and practices even today in South India that equate Brahmins and untouchables.²⁰ This tendency, which must be quite ancient, undoubtedly increased the resolve of the Brahmins to maintain their purity and orthodoxy, and pushed them to segregate themselves from any dangerous forces in an extreme manner. We have seen how Brahmins became vegetarians and banned chicken and dogs from their streets. In worship also this exclusiveness manifested itself. In *Akam* 220, the breasts of the heroine are said to be as

¹⁸Many of the poems associate Brahmins with Śiva -- see especially *Puram* 6 and 166.

¹⁹Stein, "Integration of the Agrarian System of South India." In *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, 1969), pp. 175-216.

²⁰There are many proverbs that equate Brahmins and Harijans throughout the Tamil country. One in Northern Ceylon says that Brahmins and Harijans are but two sides of the same sandal.

hard to get to see “as the well-guarded tall post of the sacrifice completed in Cellūr, a place of undying [sacrificial] fires, by the one with an axe [Paraṣurāma].” A few centuries after the anthologies, an untouchable was not allowed into a Viṣṇu temple, a practice shown by the exclusion of Tiruppāṇālvār, a Pāṇaṇ, from the worship of the god inside the temple proper.

The Brahmins, then, formed a new pole opposite that represented by the untouchables, and, just as important, they represented a source of auspicious power separate from the king. The effect of this new element on the social system seems to have been to formalize and institutionalize the caste hierarchy, until in medieval times in Kerala a system was evolved that actually regulated the distance that one caste could approach each other caste. There is no evidence in Sangam texts for such caste regulation, and one cannot imagine that it would have occurred had not the Brahmins come to South India to set up a polarity totally opposite that of the untouchables, a polarity that was symbolized by the total abstinence from meat (as a dead substance), and by a compulsive and extreme regulation of every-day behavior whose aim was to isolate the Brahmins from any possible taint by dangerous, disordered forces. The mechanism by which this formalization of caste took place has been suggested by Srinivas, who has shown that high castes tend to imitate Brahmins in their orthodoxy, vegetarianism, and other habits.²¹

²¹M. M. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Calcutta, 1965).

And yet, old ways in India never seem to disappear. Certainly, the new ideas introduced by the Brahmins were important, but they did not mean that the old cult of the king ceased to exist. That institution had roots that were too strong to go away; it had to be synthesized, somehow, with the new religion and practices represented by the Brahmins. What happened is that the new gods,—primarily Viṣṇu and Śiva—who were identified with Brahmins, were modeled on kings. Their temples were called “kings’ palaces” (*kōyil*); they were treated like kings—woken up in the morning with music and praises, married, taken on trips, made to fight battles; and they in return responded like kings: in their realm and for their devotees, they warded off dangerous and disordered forces and brought prosperity and order.²² The extent to which the temple mirrored the palace is astonishing. Just as the kings had untouchable bards who would travel from one palace to another, singing the greatness of each king and hoping to receive some reward, so the gods had poets—mostly Brahmins—who went from one temple to another and sang their greatness.²³ Of course, it was the Brahmins who connected the temple gods to the sources of their power by performing the proper rituals and reciting the Vedas, which were thought to be animated with sacred and auspicious power. To complement the Brahmins, there were temple dancers, who supplied erotic power to the deity (just as the *Viṛali* undoubtedly did for the human king), and musicians. Obviously, all

²²George L. Hart, III, "The Nature of Tamil Devotion." In *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), pp. 11-33.

²³This tendency is evident even in Sangam times. In the *Tirumurukārruppatai*, one of the songs of the *Pattuppāṭṭu*, one devotee recommends that another worship Murugan in a form adapted from the older theme of one bard telling another to visit a certain king and praise him if he wishes to become rich by that king's generosity.

those who served the new gods were higher castes, but they imitated, both in form and function, the untouchables who surrounded the human king.

This was one side of the new god, but there was another, for like the human king, he was also animated by disordered and dangerous power. Thus hair—a very dangerous substance—is offered to the deity (in his temple, though not in his actual presence), and there are many stories that connect blood or blood sacrifice with the new deities that are ostensibly vegetarian.²⁴ Perhaps this is one reason why, even today, some Brahmins deem it reprehensible to serve in a temple.

The new gods and the new order represented by Brahmins had enormous influence on social life and institutions in Tamilnad. They must have been supported not only by the king, but by the highest groups in the society, who saw their own prosperity threatened by the endemic warfare and instability of the older system. Thus, one finds the Vellāḷans and the other high groups making common cause with the Brahmins and working together to establish and preserve an orthodox Hindu society. From time to time, the older forms became predominant, and the society was subjected

²⁴In *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton, 1980), p. 93, David Shulman writes of origin myths associated with temples, "Here we find a striking, recurrent combination: the Tamil myths insist on the presence of both blood and milk at the moment when the sacred site is discovered." On page 105, he contrasts the Tamil temple myths with their Sanskrit counterparts, in which "plant sap or Soma is clearly superior to blood, and ashes better still! It is as if blood existed only to be transmuted into something more desirable -- the sap of plants, ashes, milk, Soma, *amṛta*, or seed." On the other hand, he continues, "the Tamil myths appear to have reversed this tendency. Blood remains dangerous and polluting, but it is also a sacred fluid. Blood is the source of life, a substance imbued with power, a dynamic, creative medium; hence, like other dynamic elements linked with chaos and death, it is potentially dangerous and must be controlled. But, like the tree rooted in Pātāla or the *tīrtha* welling up from the nether world, it is also a locus of sacred forces. Moreover, as we have seen, blood is the very instrument of revelation in the origin myths of the shrines." I would argue that the king's connection with the disordered forces of danger and death have been transferred to the god in the Tamil myths.

to warlords and continual warfare, until a king emerged who was strong enough to prevail and assert the more stable Hindu model again. The opposition of these two systems is fundamental through all post-Sangam culture of Tamilnad, and it is dramatically depicted in the seminal work of medieval South-Indian religion and culture, the *Kamparāmāyaṇam*. Kampaṇ, a non-Brahmin, contrasts Rāvaṇa, who is the epitome of the Tamil king, with Rāma, who represents the orthodox Hindu system. The depiction of Rāvaṇa is profoundly sympathetic and shows what power the old system had even on as devout a Hindu as Kampaṇ.

We must now return to our first question: what is caste in South India? The earliest Tamil texts show the existence of what seems definitely to be caste, but which antedates the Brahmins and the Hindu orthodoxy that are usually thought to be necessary for its existence. Rather, caste is seen to depend on a belief system that has peculiar notions about sacred power. The continuance and welfare of society are caused by the presence of power in its auspicious form, power that must be generated by all those who are truly members of the society—especially the king and high-born women. The maintenance of this auspicious and ordered power presupposes the control of its analogue, dangerous natural power that must feed the king, but that must be controlled in its many everyday manifestations. This power cannot be handled by those who are actually in the society, but must be controlled by classes that are low and, in a sense at least, outside of the boundaries of society. These classes, of which there are many, are the untouchables. They are characterized by their ability to manipulate dangerous power—whether in dirty clothes or in a drum or elsewhere—and by being

possessed by dangerous spirits, especially during performance. Because they could act as receptacles and controllers of dangerous power, these low castes were important to the king, since he acted as a sort of engine, transmuting the dangerous power they supplied him into its auspicious analogue. It is difficult to generalize about the numbers and nature of upper castes in ancient Tamilnad. The poems that describe marriage with a relative and arranged marriage, and the many names given to people of different occupations, suggest that society had many endogamous groups. On the other hand, the hierarchy of the groups seems less pronounced than it became later.

The modern form of the caste system seems to have been the result of changes introduced by the Brahmins and by kings who fostered the Hindu system. These changes included the creation of a group at the opposite pole from the untouchables—the Brahmins—and the endowing of the Brahmins and their gods with auspicious power that had hitherto been reserved for the king. The effect of this was to accentuate differences between the various caste groups (differences that had probably been pronounced originally only among the low castes) and to make a much more elaborate hierarchy of the whole system. The untouchables seem to have become lower than they had been before, and to have been surrounded with more restrictions—no doubt as a result of the fact that king was no longer so dependent upon them (as he now had the Brahmins and their Vedic rites), and that the small king was no longer as important as he once was, having been replaced by the newer gods with their Brahmin attendants. In other words, the function of the untouchables no longer included serving

kings—a function that must have enhanced their low status—but was limited to such mundane and undignified tasks as cutting hair, washing clothes, and catching fish.

As important as the Brahmins and the Brahmanical religion were, they were not the creators of the caste system in South India. They influenced the system profoundly, no doubt, but caste is found in most of its manifestations before the Brahmins became prominent. Its origins must be seen in the belief system that developed with the agricultural civilization of South India: that sacred power in its natural state is dangerous and demands groups outside of society proper to control it. What distinguishes this Indian model from all others I know of is that the controller of this power is deemed to be low and is excluded from society. I have suggested that a corollary of this is that the low-caste controller of power has no power of his own, but is animated entirely by the power which he handles, while the upper castes—especially women and the king—have power that they must be careful to keep in an auspicious condition. There are other ways of looking at this: that the lower castes are characterized by natural power, which is disordered already and necessitates relatively few restrictions, while the upper castes, which make up the society proper, are characterized by ordered and artificial power, and so must constantly strive to keep that power in its auspicious, artificial condition, living lives as far as possible from the forest and uncontrolled nature. Whatever description we use, the result is a system in which a large class exists whose function is to deal with disordered power and which is therefore in some senses excluded from society. It is this fact that animates the caste system and distinguishes it

from other systems that involve differentiation by birth or class.