

and culture. It has already published a Tamil Course through French and has been, almost from the start, publishing a series of articles on Tamil culture. It is becoming more and more popular.

It is hoped that the Tamil community will move from progress to progress and that, in the years to come, it will play an important part in making Mauritius prosperous and great.

In the compilation of this paper, much information has been obtained from A. BEEJADHUR's book: *Les Indiens à l'Île Maurice* and PROF. BISSOONDOYAL's booklet: *A short History of the Tamils of Mauritius*.

THE NATTUKKOTTAI CHETTIAR COMMUNITY AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

M. NADARAJAN

EARLY HISTORY

In the early days the Tamilnad, the present Madras and Kerala states of India, was divided into three principal kingdoms. They were the Chera (present Kerala State), Chola (present Trichy, Tanjore, Arcot and Chingleput districts of the Madras State), and the Pandya (present Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Tinnavelly districts of the Madras State) kingdoms. While Northern India was being torn between frequent internal wars and foreign invasions from across the Himalayas, South, under the Tamil monarchs, had comparatively better governments, a higher standard of learning, civilization and culture, undisturbed by foreign invasions. Though the rulers of these three Kingdoms fought among themselves occasionally, when there were threats from the North, they generally united to resist. These kingdoms had a prosperous overseas trade through their several ports with countries across the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Earliest recorded history and ancient Tamil literature state and excavations in India, Eastern and Western countries confirm that the Tamils or the Dravidians, this being another name for the Tamils, and their ships carried on a prosperous trade with the West as far as Rome and with the East as far as Cathay.

The Nattukkottai Chettiar community members are Tamils by race and Hindus by religion. They are also known as 'Vanikars',¹ 'Nagarathars',² 'Chettiars', 'Chettyars' and 'Chetteys',³ the last term is perhaps the equivalent of North Indian 'Settus', meaning merchants. The term 'Chetteys' like the word 'Killingi' in Malaya is now considered a term of contempt and is therefore practically obsolete among the elite. The customs and manners of this race and the extent of their trade and wealth are mentioned even in the Sangam literature such as Pattinappalai, Mathuraikanchi, Nedunalvaday and so on. There is a reference in Tolkappiyam to a custom, which was in vogue till about 1924, among

¹ Vanikars: businessmen.

² Nagarathars: those who live in cities.

³ Settirai is a form of customs tax for business; therefore Chettyys refer to businessmen.

the Chettiars, “முத்தீர் வழக்கம் மகடுவோ டி.ல்லை” and the meaning of it, according to Illampooranar’s commentary, is that when going a-broad for trade, the wives do not follow. ‘Silappathikaram’, the most celebrated Tamil epic, is based upon the life of a Chettiar family, giving a vivid description of the Community’s wealth, position in the state and influence in the Chola Kingdom. As the list will be exhaustive I shall stop here and continue the narrative conforming to the title.

Of the three Tamil monarchies, the Chola Kingdom was materially the most prosperous, since the waters of the eternal river Cauvery and her many tributaries watered the fields and gardens of the State and it also had a greater share of overseas export and import trade. The capital of this State was Kaveripattinam (the Khaberis of Ptolemy), also known as Kaveripoompattinam, Poom Pukar or Pukar. This was a famous seaport at the estuary of Cauvery, and it is in this city and her neighbourhood in the 8th century B.C. we get a more clear recorded history of the Chettiar community.

By religion as already stated the Chettiars are Hindus and are generally the followers of Siva, and among the Saivite saints there are few from this Community. In the four main castes of the Hindu religion, they belong to the third, the Vaishyas (merchants and traders). They were all vegetarians in early days though most of them have now changed their faith in pure vegetable diet.

In ancient days according to the annals, members of this community owned ships and were trading in gold, pearl, ivory, rice, spices and cloths with Eastern and Western countries. As it is now, it was then that those engaged in export and import trade made great fortunes. This community likewise amassed considerable wealth and as a result gained power, respect and position in the Chola Kingdom.

Their place in society became so important that they became the hereditary crown bearers of Chola kings for centuries till they were forced to abandon the country. All went on well with them till about A.D. 1463, some records put this period at 8th Century A.D. which seems more appropriate. It appears that the strength of the community at this period was about 20,000. Now the River Cauvery flooded and inundated a great part of the Chola country, and threatened to invade the capital, Pukar. King Poovanthi Cholan, the then ruler of Chola Kingdom, proclaimed that every man and woman of age should go forth and assist in checking further devastations by the flood. The Chettiar community having grown proud and conceited on account of their wealth and power, slighted the royal proclamation, which when brought to the notice of the king, enraged him as he had already some grudge against them for various other reasons, and as a result they lost his favour and were subjected to a series of punishments, forfeitures, abduction and massacre. These successive calamities brought by the king on the community reduced their number considerably and their wealth to nought. The existing palm-leaf

historical evidence in the Chettiar clan temples in South India relating to this period of dispersion and migration is most pathetic to read. In the annals of the Chettiar Community, this mournful period is somewhat parallel to the Christians’ martyrdom under Roman rulers till Constantine the Great accepted the faith himself. To depict this period there are several legends, poems and plays, most of them still in palm-leaf form. While admitting the indifference of the community to the royal proclamation as a serious fault, a man of the present democratic age shudders even to read of those savage days when justice was administered by despotic monarchs according to their whims and fancies. Those that escaped the royal retribution scattered themselves to different parts of South India.

The Chola massacre left very few females alive and therefore the Chettiars inter-married with the Vellala Community for a time. The matrimonial alliance, though no longer continued, is dearly cherished even to this day. When ladies of the Chettiar Community are initiated in the Saiva Mantras (equivalent to Christian baptism), it is performed by Vellala Community priests. During birth, marriage and death, the Vellala priest is given a noble place among the Chettiars. On the 9th day following the death of a married woman, there is an important ceremony in which the priest will lead the son of the deceased in Tamil prayers, commending the soul of the deceased to Lord Siva for admission into Heaven. This ceremony is conducted by a Vellala priest.

LATER HISTORY

One section of those who fled from the Chola Kingdom settled in Pandya Kingdom, in the present Ramanathapuram and part of Trichy Districts. The compassionate ruler of the Pandya Kingdom gave these Chettiars permission to settle with land for settling and also nine temples, since those who migrated were divided into nine clans. Each of them now own one temple, named after their respective clan. These temples are used as places of worship as well as clan centres for discussion and settlement of all matters, spiritual or temporal. When a reference is made now to Nattukkottai Chettiar Community, or Chettiars, or Chettyars, or Nagarathars, it refers to this particular section which settled in Pandya Kingdom. I shall refer to them hereafter as *Chettiars* or the ‘community’.

In their new land they were farmers, weavers, sellers of grain and cotton and grocers; and thus were slowly building up their lost position and wealth.

I am giving below the names of clans, the approximate year of taking over these nine temples, present population (1949) and value of assets (1949) held by these temples. All the temples are situated in the present Ramanathapuram District of the Madras State.

CLAN NAME & TEMPLE ⁴	Year taken over in A.D.	Population (married persons only)	Assets: Rs.
Iraniyur Koil	714	2,578	1,606,000
Eluppakkudi Koil	714	2,900	450,000
Elayatthangudi Koil	707	5,994	1,900,000
Surakkudi Koil	718	1,286	200,000
Neman Koil	714	1,504	687,000
Pillayarpatti Koil	714	3,428	1,369,000
Matthur Koil	712	7,134	1,600,000
Vairavan Koil	712	5,484	1,405,000
Vellangudi Koil	718	44	1,325,000
		<hr/>	<hr/>
		30,352	10,542,000

Some of these temples contain inscriptions of historical value and one, the Pillayarpatti Koil, is a Pallava type cave temple, with statues of a Pallava ruler and his consort carved inside the cave with inscriptions. Mr. Saw Ganesan has written and published a booklet covering the history of this temple and its clan.

Every marriage and death of a married person is recorded in the temple of the clan concerned. So the census, as far as the married people are concerned, is kept automatically by these records and will be up-to-date. But these records do not include children and unmarried persons, and they are, it is estimated, about 30,000 in 1949. So the total population of this small Community all over the world is just about 60,000. There were, once 96 and now 78 villages and towns in the area specified above, wherein the Chettiars have their ancestral homes.

During the past 100 years or so the community made great fortunes in and outside India and spent large sums of money in renovating and constructing temples establishing centres of religious learning, poor-homes, hospitals, schools and colleges in India. From Cape Comorin in the South to the Himalayas in the North, from Jamnagar in the West to Calcutta in the East, there is not an important city or a place of pilgrimage without a choultry or some other charitable institution or temple constructed and maintained by the Community. I give below some figures to show the money the Chettiars have spent in India in establishing temples etc. up to 1960.⁵

⁴ Koil means a temple, and each named after their respective clans. Dates and figures obtained from written records and enquiries at temples concerned.

⁵ Enquiries made from prominent members of the Community and Tamil books.

	Religious establishments Rs. in millions	Non-religious establishments Rs. in millions
In areas where they live permanently ..	400	300
Rest of South India	360	300
Rest of India	150	25
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	910	625

CEREMONIES AND CUSTOMS OF THE CHETTIARS

The nine temples of the nine clans are the final authorities in all religious and social matters of their respective clans. Each has a standing committee of its own elected annually. They decide all questions when referred, including partition by arbitration of estates of a deceased person amongst his sons and daughters. All the ceremonies are according to the tenets of Hinduism, except that they never had the distinction of burning their widows at any period in the history of their community; in fact, this notorious practice was unpopular and never practised by the Tamils and Malayalees. (Ref. E. Thompson: *Suttee*.) A marriage is contracted between two members of different clans only and not between members of the same clan. Annually members of all the nine clans used to meet at a central place to discuss matters of common interest; but this is discontinued now.

Karaikudi is the principal town of the Chettiars in India. It has about 30 elementary schools, 5 high schools, 5 colleges, all the colleges being founded by the late Dr. Sir R. M. Alagappa Chettiar. There is also the Central Electro-Chemical Research Institute of the Government of India, for which he has donated generously.

IN MODERN SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Coming to the prosperous 19th century, we find India under the British rule. The Queen's government had guaranteed freedom of worship and progressive liberty of expression. "Where their ceremonies are cruel, where the tenets injure human beings in property, life, or limb, the government must step in; for to guard these is its peculiar sphere. But in all that concerns their Gods their reverence, their modes of worship, and laws by which it is decided, let them be perfectly left . . ." — *The Queen's Government and Religions of India*, by J. Millus.

In course of time, the foreign invaders of the North began to claw into the South. It was at this juncture that the (English) East India Company entered into Indian political arena; finally resulting in the complete takeover of Indian administration by the British Government. The efficient colonial rule of the British united India as one country, it put an end to several cruel and inhuman practices in the name of God and religion as also forced conversion, abduction and other barbarities.

It opened up the country by roads, railways and modern communications, etc. It established institutions of culture and learning such as the Universities of Madras, Bombay and Calcutta and in short brought peace and the common blessings of life to every door and thereby helped to sow the seeds of democracy and a feeling of national unity among the various races of India. It was also during this century that the Indian National Congress was founded.

The Chettiars, being a mercantile community, always alert and looking for business adventures, made full use of all the opportunities offered by this peaceful and enlightened rule.

Guy Wint, in his book *The British in Asia*, states that the spread of British Empire was the result of Indo-British partnership. It was a joint creation of Britain and India, organising ability from Britain, manpower and resources from India. This is true so far as economic and cultural fields are concerned. The Chettiar community had its share of this period of prosperity. They followed the victorious British standard to Ceylon in 1805, to Malaya and Singapore in 1824, to Burma in 1854 and to Indo-China and the East Indies about the same period. In these countries they became moneylenders, traders, contractors, planters, land-owners and farm-owners. While going abroad in those days, the Chettiars never took their females with them as mentioned previously in this paper. The period of stay abroad was then usually limited to three years for each individual, after which period the man returned to India to this family with what he earned and spent from two to three years at home before sailing back to his place of business.

With the expansion and prosperity of the British Empire, the prosperity of the Chettiar community also multiplied. They earned great names and made fortunes abroad, which they periodically brought back to India. In their hometowns they built palatial houses. They renovated and reconstructed almost all the famous temples of South India, established centres for the propagation and learning of the vedas and sastras, both in Tamil and Sanskrit, all over India. Though, numerically a very small community in India, their contribution to the cause of education and religion stands unique.

An approximate account of the assets of the Chettiar community in South-east Asia is given below with the number of Chettiars in those areas just before the outbreak of the Second World War. In all the countries of South-east Asia, their financing has considerably helped the development and reclamation of land and trade which led to the prosperity of the countries concerned — rice in Burma and Indo-China, rubber in Malaya, tea and coconut in Ceylon, and so on.

NAME OF COUNTRY ⁶	No. of business establishments	Rice-land and Plantations owned, in acres	Value of assets and cash advances in millions (Rs.)	Chettiar populations
Burma	1600	2,800,000	800	3000
Malaya & Singapore	1000	500,000	400	2000
Ceylon	500	150,000	200	1200
Indo-China	200	200,000	100	400
Rest of East-Indies	150	15,000	50	200
	3450	3,665,000	1550	6800

BURMA

The Chettiar Community has had greatest business interests in Burma. They had a very influential Chamber of Commerce, a widely circulated weekly newspaper, a representative in the House of Representatives, (Burma Government Act 1935), had made a generous endowment, and established a Chair for commercial education in the University of Rangoon, were running a very large residential High School in which children of all races were admitted, in addition to many other non-religious charities. Doctor J. R. Andrews and Dr. John S. Furnivall have discussed at length in their works about Chettiars in Burma. They were contemporaries in Burma. While Dr. Andrews devoted his time to teaching economics, Dr. Furnivall had his contact in the economic field at the University along with Dr. Andrews and in addition, he was a civil servant holding several senior appointments in succession with the Government of Burma and was almost a Burman by his matrimonial connections. Therefore, Dr. Furnivall was in a more advantageous position to express a conclusive view. In his book *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, Dr. Furnivall has given a glowing tribute to the endeavours of the Chettiar Community in bringing under cultivation with their capital and industry, several million acres of swamp in the Delta area of lower Burma.

During the Second World War quite a larger number of Chettiars in South-east Asian voluntarily joined and also gave generous donations to the Indian National Army and the Indian Independence League, formed by the dynamic Indian leader, Netaji Subash Chandra Bose; and thereby the Community contributed its share in men and money for the liberation of India. Several senior positions of trust and responsibility were held by Chettiars in the organization and its Headquarters. There were also a few Chettiar ladies in the Women's Section of the organization!

⁶ The figures were obtained from enquiries and records of the Nattukkottai Chettiar Chambers of Commerce in Rangoon, Colombo, Saigon, Malaya and Singapore.

The end of the Second World War brought several political changes in countries of South-east Asia, as a result of which, with others the Chettiar Community suffered great financial loss in Burma, ending finally in the nationalisation of land and other assets without an adequate compensation. This hit the Chettiars in Burma the hardest. Generally overseas — Ceylon with its 'stateless Indians' and nationalisation schemes; Indo-China with her internal dissensions and Communist inroads; Indonesia with her 'endless' revolutions — all these unfavourably affected the business interests of the Community. Most of the Chettiars in the countries mentioned above have now come back to India and have created problems of employment and re-settlement. I must mention here that the Indian Government did not intervene sufficiently to safeguard the rights of Indians in the above countries or to obtain reasonable compensation for their loss.

As far as Malaysia and Singapore are concerned, the situation is different. Even though immigration laws have been introduced since 1953, the governments are in the hands of leaders who are wise and foresighted persons of goodwill and understanding. Therefore, the Community is able to carry on their business in these countries. Money-lending in general, is a shrinking business for the Community in these countries. There are more Chettiars in the various professions and trades rather than in moneylending. Most of the educated have now dropped the traditional suffix 'Chettiar' after their names. Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish them by their names.

The beginning of the 20th century brought a change in their mode of learning and business activities at home and abroad. They started taking a greater interest in English education, sent their children to universities in India and abroad, founded their own high schools, and colleges. In business they formed and floated joint stock companies, established banks and composite insurance companies, hugh textile, cement and paper mills and factories on modern lines. Members of the Community are now either shareholders or on the directorates of most of the well-known limited concerns particularly in India.

The university education has produced a good sprinkling of graduates, men and women, who are now serving in India and South-east Asia in governments or commercial houses or as lecturers and teachers or have established their own practices as in the case of doctors, lawyers, architects and the like. Apart from elementary schools, the Chettiar Community has established 35 high schools and 10 colleges in South India in addition to several vocational and technical institutes, entirely financed and managed by them. In addition to these is the famous Annamalai University, established by the munificence of the late Rajah Sir M. A. Annamalai Chettiar of Chettinad.

GENERAL

In all important towns of those countries, outside India, where the Chettiars have settled permanently or for business purposes they have established their own temples and charitable organisations. The members of the Community contribute annually, certain percentage of their profit or the capital invested, for the maintainance of these. There are annual festivals like Thaipusam in Singapore, Penang, Rangoon and Saigon: Panguni Uttiram in Kuala Lumpur and Audivel in Ceylon. During these festivals, feeding the poor is an important item of the celebrations. Almost all their temples overseas are consecrated to Lord Subramaniam, also popularly known as Murugan. All Community meetings, including those of a business nature, are held in these temples. No meeting, whether held inside or outside the temple, will have a Chairman; for Lord Subramaniam also called affectionately the 'Chetty Murugan', is regarded as Chairman for any Community meeting.

CONCLUSION

There is not a trade or vocation in which one does not find a Chettiar now. Members of the Community can be found from the fields of neurological surgery to cinema trade. In spite of modern education and contact with modern ideas, most of the younger generation are conservative in their social outlook, in this they must learn to be more flexible and tolerant. The young generation should cultivate in greater measure and acquire the habit of self-reliance, self-confidence and enterprising as well as indomitable courage, the key that led to the success of their ancestors. I conclude this paper by stating that the Chettiars, as an enterprising and hardworking community will progress and prosper anywhere under any condition.

The Chettiar Community in India, Burma, Ceylon, Indo-China, Malaysia, and Singapore, could each easily cover a separate thesis.

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DRAVIDIAN ELEMENTS IN MALAY CULTURE

JOSEPH MINATTUR

What strikes at the first blush a South Indian visitor to a Malay village is its atmosphere of familiarity. The Malay house raised high from the ground, with its roof thatched with palm tree fronds reminds him of houses similarly built in certain parts of Malabar. The garden around the house, with its coconut and areca palm-trees and bananas evokes in him recollections of his own home if he happens to be from the Malabar coast.

IN A MALAY HOUSE

This atmosphere of familiarity is not confined to the externals of a Malay village. It does not stop at the threshold of the house. The hospitality he meets with is something familiar, even if unexpected. If he is invited to a meal, he is served rice, meat and fish curries and vegetables. The curries taste very much like the ones he is used to at home. The vegetable dishes also have a familiar Dravidian flavour. One of them is *kachang bendi*. He recollects that in his own country it is called *venda*. He is also served *achar* (pickles) which is a little different from what he is used to at home but is referred to by the same name. He finds that coconut milk has gone into the preparation of many of the dishes. The name for coconut, *kelappa*, appears to him to sound very much like *kerappal*, a name, though unfamiliar, could mean coconut milk. He also comes across other seemingly familiar names, for instance, piring (saucer) appears to correspond to the *piris* at home, and the *pinggan* (plate) is not very different from *pinganam* in which he is served rice when he is in Malabar.

If he is invited to spend the night in the Malay house, he is taken to a room where he finds a *kattil*; its familiar shape and its more familiar name strike him. The mats spread on the cot, as well as those on the floor are familiar sights. He may see a *kendi* (a metal goblet) in a corner of the room. In appearance it is a little unlike the *kindi* he is familiar with in his own house, but the name rings authentic evoking in him memories of the not too distant past when, in Malabar, every wife kept a