

Commerce and Caste: An inquiry into the Occupational Castes Groups and The English East India Company in Madras during 17th and 18th Centuries

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The role of the Occupational Castes under the British East India Company was very significant in Madras. They were cogs of wheel for the economy of the East India company. However, the Occupational Castes were not merchants traditionally but they were very helpful for the running the business of the British Company. Established historians of this period did not focus on the commercial aspects of life of the Occupational Castes. Pertaining to the sources, I am heavily dependent upon the records of Fort St. George, which is a new source for constructing the histories of the Occupational Caste. There is a lot of information on the Occupational Castes in the records of Fort St. George.

Madras was one of the prolific commercial towns under the British East India Company on the Coromandel Coast in the second half of the seventeenth century.¹ It was the largest city on the Coromandel Coast² and its trade was considerable, especially in cottons.³ Very eminent merchants were permitted to dwell and were allowed free trade under the English⁴ who were the lords and master of Madras town.⁵ Indeed, the founding of Madras in 1640 was largely due to the British commercial interests.⁶ East India Company created the 'Black Town' for the local inhabitants such as the Moors, Hindus, foreign traders, artisans, sailors and workmen.⁷ It was also primarily a commercial centre and the majority of its inhabitants directly or indirectly depended upon trade.⁸ The Black Town was the commercial centre of the city and many mercantile offices were situated here and it was a more thickly populated part of the city.⁹ Joseph J. Brenning analysed that European enclaves served as trading centres in the seventeenth century and Madras was one of the major centres of trade in the Coromandel Coast.¹⁰ In other words, Madras was a major entrepot (freeport with warehousing facilities) and redistributive centre¹¹ and growing commercial centre in the Coromandel Coast.¹² The East India Company thought that she will achieve her ambition of developing Madras

as a commercial centre in her dominions and this proved enormously successful.¹³ Generally, Madras became a strong commercial power centre in India during the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century.¹⁴

No doubt, by nature, the East India Company was an organization founded to engage in commercial enterprise. Basically, they were merchants inspired by the Portuguese and the Dutch. The English also wanted to have a share in the riches of the Indian trade. This trading nature brought them to the Indian Ocean for cottons in particular, and spices, jewels, perfumed rice and other commodities, in general.¹⁵ Getting a grant from Venkatappa, the Naik of Chingleput who controlled the Coromandel Coast from Pulicat to San Thome, Francis Day and Cogan (both of whom became Governors of Madras in later times) got an offer to erect a fort at Madras.¹⁶ The British Company settled near the old village of Chennapatam in 1639 and constructed the Fort St. George in 1640. Fort St. George became the residence of their President and Council and controlled all the trade of Bay of Bengal and other Eastward trades.¹⁷ The English got complete freedom from customs duties on their imports and exports along with the grant. They were allowed to exercise extra territorial power within the

grant as well.¹⁸ Thus, the East India Company was a trading company which played a significant role in Madras.

EIC and the Occupational Caste Groups

Commercially, the role of occupational caste groups in Madras was very significant. These groups were directly or indirectly dependent upon trade.¹⁹ In other words, these castes were important for the commercial functioning of the English East India Company too. Therefore, the relationship between them was that of mutual interdependence. Both were necessary for the smooth functioning of commercial activities in Madras. For instance, in 1680, three or four thousand inhabitants, including a large number of the Company's employees, headed by Pedda and Chinna Venkatadri, left the town in protest, launching a strike. This strike disturbed the business of the Company very badly.²⁰ In this strike, not only the adult men but also the women and children participated and they left the town. In fact, soldiers and peons were sent out to bring back the mutineers and disperse them so that they might not sustain such a strike and harm the town's people. In this strike, the Dubashes, chief peons, merchants, washers and others left their daily jobs, which caused tremendous difficulties to town people as well as for the Company business. Even the Pariah caste did not beat drum, and carpenters did not bring wood to town,²¹ so much so that, Streynsham Master, the then Governor of Madras, realised the usefulness of painters and washermen, especially of the washers of whom he writes that "Washers, who does as yet strike, close to their business and are the more to be encouraged by reasons of their usefulness in whitening the cloth at this time being in the height of that business."²²

The above facts show how the occupational caste groups were important for the English in Madras. It also confirms that power-relation was changing particularly for washermen, Pariah caste, weavers, coolies and peons, whose positions were very weak in Ancient India.²³ But in the late medieval period, especially after the coming of the European companies, their conditions improved financially, politically and socially.²⁴ Thus, the English East India Company and the occupational caste groups were dependent upon each other. Yet, the English Company was in a superior position and merchants who accepted with company's subordination derived some benefits and made closer relationship with the English,²⁵ such as Sesadra, Konara Chitti, Beri Timanna, Kasi Virana and Sunaca. All were the chief merchants of Madras in the English Company and they were very influential and leaders of their respective caste groups, i.e., Right and Left Hand Castes.²⁶

Madras: The Occupational Caste Groups

Within the occupational caste groups, there were many sub-castes and divisions. Each and every caste has its own specific functions and duties. Even their social, political, cultural and economic powers were different. Some of the castes were highly respected in the society and belonged to affluent background such as Chitties and Komaties. Some of the castes were badly treated as outcastes who were at the bottom of the caste ladder. For instance, the Pariahs were outcastes in the society and very weak financially.²⁷ Merchants of Madras who played a very significant role were the Komati and Chitti merchants.²⁸ Some of the castes were of weavers, palanquin bearers, peons, coolies, labourers, slaves and other castes who were not merchants in the true sense but they were equally worthy for the Company.²⁹ Some castes extended their activities in the Sea such as the boatmen or *cattamaran* castes who were also not merchants but important for the English Company.³⁰

Arasaratnam is of the view that Indian merchants were of diverse groups in the seventeenth century, divided into many categories on the basis of ethnic and caste origins, followed their traditional commercial duties and engaged for generations in specific trading profession. Then, there were other social groups that moved from other occupations into commerce, like some of the weaver castes took commercial occupations and boatmen took up small-scale commerce. He divided them broadly into four categories:

1. Sea-borne traders who were ship owners and traders whose primary activities were long-distance and coast trade.
2. Overseas merchants whose activities were larger than the first.
3. Kings, princes, other members of the royal family, administrative and military officers who took these professions.
4. Nakodas who were specialist sailors and served as sea captains and navigators.³¹

Apart from these categories there were other merchants who worked in ports and hinterland as wholesalers of many commodities. They were bulk buyers of spices, copper, tin, broadcloth, lead, zinc and other minerals imported by Europeans. They were also vital for export trade in textile, pepper, indigo, saltpetre and opium.³² Separate from these categories, there were other merchants who functioned as middlemen and brokers whose major area of operation was the textile trade and they had close link with weaving villages. Another important category of merchants were financiers, shroffs,

dealers in exchange and the minting of specie.³³ Documents suggest that Madras merchants actively participated in all categories, particularly, Chetti and Komati merchants.

Kasi Virana, for instance, a Komati by caste, a chief merchant of Madras, engaged actively in commercial activities as he was admitted to take European goods, landed from Company's ship in 1674.³⁴ About his activity in trade and importance in Madras, Abbe Carre, a French traveller in Madras during 1672-73, reported that Virana was "the Principal Merchant who governs everything at Madras" which confirms their role in trade and importance.³⁵ Lawrence Sawcer, a company servant who arrived at Madras, wrote in a letter that Kasi Virana was undoubtedly influential, as the natives said that Sir William "governs within the Fort and Verona (Viranna) without."³⁶ Further, Abbe Carre reported that Virana was the "richest and most powerful in the country who was now living at Madras. He had in his hand all the English trade on the coast and neighbouring countries."³⁷ Virana was in a position to recruit his own servants to look after his growing trades, which spread widely.

Fort St. George record puts that "Cassa Verona, apart by himself acquainting us how that he having private notice that the said merchants abroad in the country did not look after the weavers as they should, but minded their own case too much, he was fain to send out five of his own servants unto each head place being eighteen in numbers, having each their circuit and several others subdivided, with orders to look after the business better and remedy what amiss, at which the said Merchants took great offence."³⁸ The Chetti merchants were very mobile and went to Ceylon for trade and even they had their own people settled in Ceylon who gave them significant assistance.³⁹ It shows that a caste like Chettis played a very significant role in all kinds of trade, when every caste had played some kind of commercial roles in Madras.

In the context of commerce, the Occupational Castes groups may be classified into five categories:

1. *Merchant Class*: The Komaties and the Chetties castes activities make them as merchant groups who were traditionally associated with that business.
2. *Artisans*: The group of five, or *Kammalan* castes, were the artisan castes. They were blacksmiths, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, carpenters and masons and also those involved in the handloom industry, the weavers, bleachers and dyers. Some of the other artisan groups were the cobblers, tanners, potters, brick-makers and other castes. Susan M. Neild termed them as "skilled Indian artisans."⁴⁰
3. *Labourers*: In this group came the palanquin-bearer,

coolie, peons, grass-cutter, gardener, umbrella-bearer, *kahar*, flag men, kite salesmen, cooks, barbers and others. Susan M. Neild called them "unskilled labourers".⁴¹

4. *Groups of Sea-labourers*: K.N. Chaudhuri recognised them as the "group instantly recognisable in every society, the one that lived off the sea."⁴² They were fishermen, coral-divers, boat builders, rope-makers, net menders and so on.
5. *Slaves*: Slaves were employed as domestic labourers and were very useful to the Company.⁴³

Chief Merchants

The merchant class played a leading role for the East India Company in Madras. Their functions were diverse and some of the merchants being powerful became the chief merchants of the East India Company. The chief merchants of the English Company enjoyed certain privileges. First, the chief merchants directly participated in the Company trade which far exceeded the trade of other brokers of the Company in Madras. Secondly, the chief merchants mediated between these brokers and the Company. The lesser brokers did not negotiate contracts with the Company directly but only through the chief merchants as sub-contractors. For most cases, the Company in Madras dealt with only one local chief merchant. The chief merchant through this arrangement gained a monopoly over the English investment.⁴⁴

Seshadri or Sesadra Nayak and Konari or Konara Chitties were the chief merchants of the Company during the early days of Madras (in 1650). The English Company conducted their trade through them. But unfortunately, both merchants got into financial difficulties and were unable to run their businesses. Therefore, a Brahmin merchant called Venkata was appointed as the chief merchant of Madras.⁴⁵ Sesadra and Konara were removed due to several reasons. One was the financial crisis and second was due to the right hand caste and left hand caste dispute, where the roles of two Brahmin brothers, Venkata and Kanappa, and the English government failed to resolve the situation.⁴⁶

In the 1650s, Beri Timanna, who belonged to the Perika Balija caste (weavers of gunnies as well as traders in salt), emerged as chief merchants of Madras.⁴⁷ Brenning points out that it brought a "new generation of merchants into prominence in Madras." He found that the new generation was worthily different from its predecessors, the Malaya family, and occupied humble positions in the Company.⁴⁸ Kasi Virana, who was a long time partner of his predecessor, Beri Timanna, was appointed as chief merchant of Madras and surpassed his senior partner in

some respects.⁴⁹ Kasi Virana accumulated great respect as Abbe Carre reported that he, as the richest and the most powerful in the country, controlled all the English trade on the coast of Coromandel.⁵⁰ He accumulated enormous wealth and spread his business in eighteen circles (district)⁵¹ and appointed five headmen to look after the business.⁵² Kasi Viranna died in 1680 and was succeeded by Timanna's younger brother, Pedda Vencatadry.⁵³

At this time, the Madras government was controlled by Streynsham Master who was a vigorous and able administrator but a man of little patience.⁵⁴ Inspired by the Dutch's "Joint Stock Company" system in Pulicat, Streynsham Master also decided to make a Joint Stock Company for the East India Company for investment and accordingly there were seven or more principal men appointed to manage the trade and adjust their accounts. Every year, they had to ensure about the 'Joint Stock Company'.⁵⁵ The Joint Stock agreement was signed by nine chief merchants initially. They are: 1) Berri Pedda Venkatadry; 2) Cassa Muddoo Verana; 3) Calleany Chitti; 4) Mutty Chitti; 5) Sura Yengana; 6) Conde Malla Madavaya; 7) Rango Chitty; 8) Comarapa Moodaliar; and 9) Aiapa Chitty.⁵⁶ Pedda Vencatadry later on withdrew from it due to the decline of his income. As a result, Vencata left the city with 5,000 persons. But the efforts of the Right hand caste (Vencata belonged to Right hand caste) were not so strong as to force Master to change the Company's position.⁵⁷

After his death, his younger brother, Chinna Venkatadri became the Chief Merchant and headed the Joint Stock Trading with the English. Chinna Venkatadri imposed on the inhabitants of the Black Town, tobacco tax, betel tax, paddy tax, market tax and fisherman's taxes⁵⁸ but he misused the power. Knowing this the Company discharged him from the position of Chief Merchant.⁵⁹ Chinna Venkatadri died in 1689 and Alangatha Pillai succeeded him as the Chief Merchant. He jointly held charge of the Joint Stock Company with two others, Beri Timmappa (Pedda Venaktadri's son) and Kasi Muddda Viranna, for six years.⁶⁰ The East India Company found many faults and decided not to purchase any cloth from them.⁶¹ Subsequently, Chikka Serappa became the Chief Merchant of the Company.

According to Kanakalatha Mukund, Chikka Serappa dominated Madras from 1696 to 1703.⁶² He made several contracts with the Company and became very important for the English. Fort St. George records mentioned: "It is resolved that it be propounded to Serapa that he produce to us a Company of Merchants who are inclined to join with him, and will bring in their share of a stock in money with whom if we approve of them and their stock we

will contract for so much as they will undertake to provide, upon such terms as we can agree."⁶³ Unfortunately, Serappa became bankrupt and could not pay the Company's debts. As a result, the Company confined him in a godown as the record says, "It is agreed they be confined to the Brown Godown and there to remain till they have paid the Company's debt, or given satisfaction for the same."⁶⁴ Consequently, according to the wish of the East India Company, "Seraupau himself mortgaged all his houses and gardens for security of his debt to the Company, upon which Seraupau, Naira Verona and Ponagattee Narso were discharged from their confinement..."⁶⁵

Another major merchant in Madras was Sunku Rama Chetti. He was the leader of a prominent Komatty merchant family of Madras whose grandfather had worked with the English.⁶⁶ Sunku Rama Chetti was a towering figure in the trade for the first twenty-five years of the eighteenth century⁶⁷ and was appointed the Chief Merchant of Madras.⁶⁸ The English government told of him: "Sunca Ramma, offering a bill of exchange for four thousand pagodas, payable to the Deputy Governor and Council of Fort St. David: Agreed the same be accepted of and so much paid out of cash here."⁶⁹ Sunca Rama played a significant role in Madras. During his time, being the Chief Merchant, he accumulated enormous wealth. The Company used to borrow money from him and other Joint Stock merchants.⁷⁰ Given below are records of some dealings:

1. One to Sunca Narrayan dated December 13, 1716, Pags 10,000.
2. One to Sunca Ramah (Rama) and Colloway (Kelavi) Chetti dated January 21, 1716. Pags. 20,000.
3. One to Sunca Ramah and New Fort St. David Merchant, May 20. Pags. 13,000.
4. One to Sunca Ramah (Rama) and Joint Stock Merchants, the June 27. Pags 18,000.

The above facts show his importance for the English East India Company.

Other important merchants were Kalavi Chetti,⁷¹ Vankata Chetti, Karanappa Chetti, Kitti Venkatapati (the brother of Kitti Narayan who was the Dubash of Madras), Sunku Muddu Rama (the brother of Sunku Rama Chetti); Sunku Narayan, Sunku Venkatachalam and Kelavi Chettis brother Muttamar Chetti. However, most of the Chief Merchants belonged to the weaver community, like Masi Muddu Varanna, Chinna Venkatadri and the most important was Beri Timanna, also from the weaving communities. This view is supported by Kanakalatha Mukund who puts that "Class differentiation had

emerged within the artisan groups as well."⁷²

S.N. Basu also posited "a *dubash* with the caste title of Chetti or Naik which would indicate a mercantile or martial caste affiliation. It is possible that more Chettis and Naiks quietly performed the functions of *dubashes* than is apparent from the records. Certainly by early 1800s, there were a number of Chettis and Naiks holding government positions as writers, accountants, managers and even translators—all jobs which might have carried the title of *dubash* in late 1700s."⁷³ The extension of the above view is held by S. Arasaratnam. He points out that within the mercantile communities who performed non-mercantile functions appeared in the European ports and other enclaves. They occupied varieties of minor roles such as interpreters or *dubashes*, ambassadors and agents or *vakils* at the territorial governors.⁷⁴

Commercial Activities of the Chief Merchants

Merchants performed varieties of activities in Madras. The Chief Merchants were the most important and their roles pertaining to their commercial practices were tremendous. In the words of Brenning, "The Chief Merchants had thus stood near the centre of Coromandel's most important market places, interacting in varying ways with the leading commercial, political and social institution of the region."⁷⁵ Subsequently, "the merchants were the most powerful and wealthy of the regional groups to come into contact with the Companies in substantial numbers."⁷⁶ Simultaneously, the English East India Company also provided the opportunities to Indian merchants, as Brenning understood that "In Madras the English permitted a new generation of Chief Merchants to gain power. They owed their status and wealth solely to their association with the Company and the Enclave."⁷⁷

Records of Fort St. George recognised that some of the Chief Merchants came from middle or even very low caste families.⁷⁸ Yet they were allowed to ride on palanquins, right to receive the presents or gifts by the governor on festive occasions and on the signing of contracts; right to purchase houses and property in favourable location in the Town, even in White Town where only the English men and other Europeans were allowed; and the right to carry their own export and import trade from their own settlements at half duty.⁷⁹ In the words of Arasaratnam, "It is significant that these signs of social prominence were treasured more and more as the tendency of these prominent merchants to strike roots in European port increased."⁸⁰ It is, therefore, a very significant trend, which was set by the East India Company for providing the opportunities for not only the upper caste but also lower caste.

Artisans, Crafts and the Commercial Centre of Madras

The artisans were not traditionally a business community but an important caste group to promote business by contributing their skills. In this context, they were, therefore, "promoting business communities" in Madras. From this instance, we can understand their importance. However, these groups played a pivotal role and contributed greatly to the English Company. The Records of Fort St. George reported the day-to-day affairs of the Company and there is very little information on these groups. Yet, one can gather enough information about the artisan groups. Here is a list of some artisans and their contribution to the English Company.

The Company great expenses:⁸¹

Charges in Garrisons:

For making tools⁸² & c., delivered the Engineer for trying the shells and mortars, 54 pagodas.

Charges of extraordinary:

For erecting Gallows & c. for hangs Roger Bullmore pirate, 26 31 40 pagodas.

Mussoola hire⁸³, 18 pagodas.

*Repairs of fortifications:*⁸⁴

For sundry repair at Ye, Garden House, 113 15 50 pagodas
Charles point: pad labourers & c, 385 25 60 pagodas.

New Warehouse: paid for material & labourers, 398 13 30 pagodas.

In another place, the record mentioned charges of Dyet & allowances as 289: 6 pagodas, and for Dyet and stores lay as 258: 29 pagodas.⁸⁵

There are cross sections of references about the activities of these occupational groups regarding painting. Records reported that "the painters have finished and brought in ten corge of chints and they wanting money into carry [on] the rest of their work, agreed that three hundred pagodas be advanced them."⁸⁶ From making gold or relating to goldworks, the English Company employed Goldsmiths.⁸⁷ Goldsmiths worked in mint generally.⁸⁸ Carpenters were employed to make wood-related work, including ships.⁸⁹ For instance, one English accounts put that "he asked the carpenters what water the ship made, he said 6 inches in 12 hours we asked him if he could not stop that leak which let in the 6 inches water in 12 hours; he said he could do it very well but it must be in smoother water than there is here, at present, here turbulent water being now too great a swell and he said he did not take it to be a leak but that the ship wanted

caulking near the water's Edge but her bottom is tight."⁹⁰ It shows the carpenter's ability to know the sea-ship situations. About the oilmen, the Records mention, "The all oylemen shall allow you every time they fill their Mill 1/6 part of a small measure of oyle."⁹¹

Weaver community's role in Madras was also very significant. From the weaving communities, a few people became the Chief Merchant of the English in Madras like Beri Timanna who was the big merchant of the Company. He had friendship and partnership with Kasi Virana, who was the towering figure in Madras.⁹² Seeing the importance of Madras, the English Company, too, wanted weavers to come in Madras. Records showed that "Serapa acquainting us that there are 50 weavers who offer to come with their families and settle here on condition they have the same encouragement as others have had."⁹³ Weavers were granted to build houses and exempted from taxes, as records says, "Here being some Betteelae weavers who have petitioned for leave to build houses and conveniences in order to carry on their trade but desire to be exempted from all manner of taxes for three years, which is agreed to be granted them, and they have bought Mrs. Health Fields Garden for that purpose."⁹⁴ The weavers became part and parcel of English East India Company and 'kumbini', which mean that they were not to be ignored.⁹⁵ Thus, these groups were contributing largely to the Company.

With this, it was also reported by the Fort St. George Records that these groups were also in a bargaining positions as balancing the power by assigning the contract of the Company and forcing them for increasing of wages. One major example was 1680s, when strike was resorted to by the Right Hand Castes where 5,000 people left the town. Painter and other castes threatened their own people of the town. The East India Company tried to mobilise washermen, painter castes, boatmen, catamaran and others. This strikes by the artisan castes disturbed the Company's business.⁹⁶ It is a very significant development in the history of Madras and in the life of occupational caste groups. It is important for both the artisans, merchants and the English because they allowed each other to make such space where each could play a vital role for the development of Madras trade.

Unskilled Labour in Madras

The category of unskilled labourers had played a tremendous role in the growth of Madras as the premier colonial port town. They were traditionally not merchants, but they acquired skilled kind of jobs as

fishermen. We also found that the landless labourers of untouchable castes were gaining the skills of weaving.⁹⁷ However, the labourers were confirming their role by showing their talents to the English Company. They also made the Company realise that without them no kind of trade can be run smoothly. Though not a commercial category, they were necessary entities too. Fort St. George Records mentioned their roles and works. Streynsham Master wrote a letter to Captain John North (Ballasore) where he focused the importance of these persons. He writes: "You are to receive on board your ship the Golden Fleece, all the persons hereunder mentioned with their number and necessary who are to take their passage upon you to Fort with myself."⁹⁸ The servants' lists are as follows:

Servants	Numbers
1. Dubasses	12 nos.
2. Palanquin boys	9 nos.
3. Peons	2 nos.
4. Flag men	2 nos.
5. Kitti sale men	2 nos.
6. Cooks	2 nos.
7. Chupdar	1 nos.
8. Rundeleers	3 nos.
9. Duty men	4 nos.
10. Barber	1 nos.
11. Arra Men	2 nos.
12. Sucky	1 nos.
13. Pattamars	4 nos.
14. Slave Boys	6 nos.

Labourers wages were different at Hugly.⁹⁹

	Rupees
Servant wages for the chief	12: Y: mensem.
For the second	8:
For the minister	6:
For Y: 3 rd : of council	5:
For Y: 4 th : of council	5:
For the Chyrurgeon	4:
For the Secretary	2:
For the Steward	2:

2. Palanquins, one for the chief, the other for the second. 7 Horses, 2 Camels (only for the chief), *gurrialls*, *Ccocks*, *mussalls*, washing, dog-keeper, barber, etc., servant as usual.

At the subordinate factories:

Servant wages for the chief	6 rupees per mensem.
For the second	4 rupees per mensem.

For the third	3 rupees per mensem.
General keeper	2 rupees per mensem.

There were 1: Palanquin for the chief; 3: horses for chief only; 3:Gurrialls; 1:cook; 1:mate; 2: Mussallches. Barber was given 2 rupees a month for washing what it coast for the entire factory.

At Medapollam: The wages were different.¹⁰⁰

Servants' wages to attend the chief was	2 pags. per mensem.
For the second	1 1/2 pags. per mensem.
For the third	1 pags. per mensem.

A steward, butler, caterer and brewer. Six men for duties, randell and Kitte sale. 1 Palanquin for the chief, 3 horses (only for the chief), 1 cook, 1 mate, washing what it costs for all the factory, barber: Pags; a month. flag men: as usual.

*At Metchlepatam (Masulipatam):*¹⁰¹

Servant wages for chief	2: pags per mensem.
For the second	21/2 pags per mensem.
For the third	1 pags per mensem.
For the chyrurgeon	1 pags per mensem.

A steward, servant, butler, caterer, buttermen and brewer. 6 men for duties, roundel and kitte sale. 1 Palanquin for the chief; 3 Horses (for the chief); 1 cook; 1 Mate; Washing what it cost for all the factory. Barber 'pags a month, a flag man, arran man, pipers, etc., as usual.

The above record shows that substantial labour force was engaged by the Company. By getting the opportunity to be employed in the East India Company services, they all increased their powers and consciousness and, therefore, they started posing questions in front of the English. For instance, it was recorded that "many of the chief washers having made their complaint to the Governor of great wrong done them in detaining their money for their labour and upon demand for offering to whiten, wash more moderate rates than it hath been done."¹⁰² Thus, we can say that the labourers contributed greatly towards the English trade and life in Madras. Subsequently, they gained importance in the society gradually.

The sea-labourers or coastal workers include fishermen, coral-divers, boat builders, rope-maker and net menders. These groups also played an important role for the company. Elijah Hoole focused their importance by analyzing that the communication between the shipping and shore was carried on exclusively by Masoola boatmen and *catamarans*.¹⁰³ These groups resided

near the sea largely.¹⁰⁴ The English Company also got interested in the fishing business. It was said that "the fishermen shall pay you (Koonu Goree Angerapa Naigui) 325 fanams per annum.... That those that boy fish and carry out of town, shall pay out of every fanams worth 4 cash ...that out of every draught of fish, you shall be allowed ten fish...that for fishing in the river, shall be allowed you ten fanams per annum."¹⁰⁵ The sea-labourer or coastal trader also played significant role in the English Company' trade.

The slaves were also important group in Madras. They are not the traditional trading communities but form the bottom ladder of the society. Slaves were largely employed as labourers, domestic workers and other menial works.

Madras Trade and Occupational Caste Groups

The Trade in Madras mainly constituted of textiles and it was a major centre during the seventeenth century. Besides, shipping, rice, elephants, mining, especially gold, and slave trades were also important but less important than the textiles. Most of these articles were basically for export. Major items of imports were pepper, spices, metals, articles for making ropes and vital to the boat-building industry.

The East India Company participated on a large scale in the above mentioned trade especially in textiles. They invested enormous amount of money for it. The Company participated in long-distance trade such as to South-East Asia, China and Japan. Not only that they also participated in the trades with Malabar Coast or Kerala especially of the pepper.

The East India Company employed some local merchants, non-mercantile groups, slaves and the untouchable caste groups for their trade. When the Chief Merchants and the Company formed the pivot of trades, artisans, labourers, and slaves also greatly contributed to the growth of trade in Madras. In fact, no trade could run smoothly without their assistances.

Textile Industry

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a French traveller, visited the Coromandel Coast during second half of seventeenth century and reported, "Its [Madras] trade was considerable, especially in cottons."¹⁰⁶ John Fryer, a British traveller points out that; Indian peoples were lovers of cotton.¹⁰⁷ Thomas Bowrey, a sailing master and captain of Royal Navy, describes that Madras was a great producer of Calicoes¹⁰⁸ (cotton cloth) and largely transported to England.¹⁰⁹ The Southern Coromandel (in

which Madras was a major textile port) was great producer of blue, red and striped guinea cloth.¹¹⁰ Irfan Habib emphasised that the textile industry had been well developed in India since the ancient period but after the coming of Europeans it became more prominent. During the seventeenth century, Masulipatam and Madras emerged as large manufacturing centres.¹¹¹ The textile was the largest export components of the trades from Coromandel Coast during second half of the seventeenth century.

Textiles were initially exported to Asian countries but through the Portuguese it was first exported to West Africa and Brazil for the slave trade. Again, during the seventeenth century, there was a growing demand for Indian cottons in Europe.¹¹² In fact, "Coromandel textiles became a link in a trade cycle which embraced the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, Western India, Malabar and Coromandel, Malacca, Java and the Spice islands"¹¹³ and it was "the opening of new markets and the rise of new production methods based on African slave labour, which created the famous triangular trade between Europe, West Africa and America, provided the Indian cotton textiles with a sustained outlet for nearly two centuries (17th & 18th)".¹¹⁴ Thus, Indian textiles covered every important port of the Indian Ocean and Indian cloth formed an important part of the economic network of the ocean.¹¹⁵

In return, India received precious metals and copper. From the beginning cotton were initially used for purchase of spices and drugs,¹¹⁶ such as gold, mostly from the Malay world, precious stone from Sri Lanka, Galconda and Borneo; and spices¹¹⁷ mostly from spice Islands i.e. Eastern Indonesia.¹¹⁸ Further, textiles and indigo were exported to Persia mainly for silver laris of Persia.¹¹⁹ We also got American silver through textile trades.¹²⁰

The importance of cotton was that it served as cheap household linen, used as dress and decorative material, expensive linen from Scotland and France.¹²¹ Moreover, cotton was easily washable, colours were fast, easy-to-clean inner clothing, comfortable to wear and for the rich it was more fashionable, especially for women's clothing that was difficult to achieve with material made from wool. The utility of cotton goods was mentioned by Jamaican traders in a petition dated 1704, "the said Island being situated in a hot climate, much of the clothing of the inhabitants is stained calicoes, which being light and cheap and capable of often washing contributes very much to keep them clean and in good health."¹²²

There were many kinds of cottons produced in the region. However, Francois Martin had mentioned that there were two kinds of broad category of cotton produced in Madras, *Calicoes* and *Muslin*.¹²³ *Calicoes* again

are of many varieties but three important varieties are such as long cloth, salem pores and Moris.¹²⁴ *Betillas* came under the category of muslin. However, long cloth or guinea cloth was usually a low grade cloth and was graded into six varieties according to counts. The North Coromandel and Coastal Orissa produced white guinea cloth which was popular in Red Sea and the Levants. The Southern Coromandel produced blue, red and striped guinea cloth. The English termed for guinea cloth was "long cloth". The term 'guinea' cloth was first coined by the Dutch. The next category of Calicoes was *salempore*. *Salempores* or bedspreads were popular in the European market. *Mooris* was a superior yellowish white cloth with a red stripe down the middle. The best kind was, however, the most sought after *chintz*.¹²⁵

Muslin was a more finely woven cloth made from superior cotton than the Calicoes. *Betilla* was produced in the Coromandel Coast. The Portuguese termed "*beatilha*". There were three main categories. Among them *organdi* was the best among muslins. *Betillas* were greatly demanded in South-East Asia, Persia and the Red Sea countries where they used as turbans. During the seventeenth century, they began to find new markets in Europe.¹²⁶

In Madras, the Company made "contract" with the local merchants that the textiles industry in Madras was gradually depended on the "contract system". In the contract system, the merchants had made promise to supply the goods by a certain date and organised their purchase and transport from the weaving towns and districts in a logistic manner. The Company had also made promises to pay certain amount of money once the goods reach their factories. For this the Company appointed the Chief Merchant, among the local people, who was given all the responsibility for production of all the required goods in time.

The Company heavily depended upon these chief merchants. For instance, the Company made a contract with Kasi Verana, one Chief Merchant, in 1676. It was said, "The Agent and Council having had several treaties with Cassa Verona & c.: Merchants about the selling unto them the several quantities of Europe goods here under mentioned, and also the contracting with them for the assortment of Calicoes for this years ships, in like manner hereunder mentioned."¹²⁷ Kasi Verona also accepted the contract: "We underwrite in the name and in the behalf of ourselves our partners, heirs and executors and administrators, jointly and severally do hereby accept of the broad cloth and cloth rashis at the prices and terms aforesaid....We do also as aforesaid oblige to provide the aforementioned quantities of Callicos to be all ready for these ships by the 5th January next at the prices and goodness settled on the 29 September."¹²⁸

In 1680, Streyntsham Master, the then Governor of Madras, formed a joint stock corporation of merchants, where each member of the Company's merchants assigned a certain number of shares. It was said, "A Joint Stock of the Merchants to provide the whole investment to pay the Company's moneys thereupon as the goods came in, and to appoint seven or more of the principal men amongst them to manage the trade and to adjust their accounts. Every year to which they answered that it was well, they would consider thereof and give an answer."¹²⁹ Till 1720, this was the policy of the English Company for textile industry.

Statistically, the Company's textiles trade reached its zenith during the first half of the seventeenth century. But in the early eighteenth century or even in last parts of the seventeenth century; textiles trade began to decline gradually. In second half of the seventeenth century, in 1664, Madras shared 41 per cent of the total quantities and 48 per cent of the total value of the textiles exported by the Company. In the same year, the total sales revenue

from Indian cotton goods was 216,836 pounds. Out of this the share of Madras textiles was 58.7 per cent followed by Gujarat at 31.1 per cent and Bengal at 10.2 per cent.¹³⁰ Despite that, the cotton scarcity was a big problem for the Company and it badly affected the cotton trade.¹³¹ In 1710, the share of Madras in the total quantities of exported textiles was 28 per cent, while Bengal held a much higher share at 47 per cent. Fort St. George Council also reported that Madras textiles were becoming unprofitable as compared to those of Bengal.¹³² This is one of the dominant factors contributing to the decision of the British to shift their HQ/ Capital to Calcutta (Commercial); the other being political—for expansion of their territory to other parts of the country. We can also see that ups and downs of the Company's textile trade in the table given below:

In the context of the cotton spinning and weaving mills in the Presidency of Madras we also have the following table.¹³⁴

*English Textile Trade in Madras:*¹³³

Prices at Madras Pagodas per scone					Total quantity contracted					
Long Cloth		Salemport			Pagodas			Number prices		
Year	Contract	Actual	Contract	Actual	Madras	Fort St. David	Total	Madras	Fort St. David	Total
1674	27.50	27.50	12.00	12.00	80,000		80,000			
1676	27.50	27.50	12.00	12.00				99,300		99,300
1677	27.50	26.12	12.00	11.40	74,000		74,000			
1678	27.50	25.50	12.00	11.12				119,000		119,000
1679	27.50	25.85	12.00	11.28						
1680	27.50	25.85	12.00	11.28				118,000		118,000
1681	27.50	25.85	12.00	11.28				134,000		134,000
1684								72,400		74,400
1685					60,000		60,000	47,400		47,400
1686					12,000	80,000	92,000			
1688	25.55	27.59	11.14	11.14	40,000		40,000			
1692	25.55	27.59	11.14	12.03	40,000	10,000	50,000			
1693	27.50	27.50	12.00	12.00	27,000	20,000	47,000			
1694	25.55	28.10	11.14	12.25	20,000		20,000			
1695	25.55	28.10	11.14	12.25	15,000		15,000			
1696	27.50	30.80	12.00	13.44	20,000	20,000	40,000			
1697	27.50	30.80	12.00	13.44	52,560		52,560			
1698	27.50	34.37	12.00	15.00	60,000	27,000	87,000			
1699	34.00	34.00	16.50	16.50	151,125		151,125	89,500		87,500
1700	31.00	36.00	15.00	16.50	150,000	30,000	180,000	85,500		85,500
1705	31.50	31.00	14.50	15.00				51,800		112,300
1708	31.50	31.50	14.50	14.50		40,000		10,120	31,250	91,970
1712	31.50	29.92	14.50	14.50				57,000	54,510	111,510
1715	31.50	33.07	14.50	15.22				58,000	64,600	122,600
1720	31.50	31.50	14.50	14.50	117,119			98,680	115,900	214,580
1740	40.00	40.00			86,920		86,920	36,477		36,477

The above table shows the ups and downs of textile trade in the Coromandel region.

Numbers	1881	1891	1901	1903
Mills	3	8	11	12
Looms		555	1735	1747
Spindles	48000	173000	288000	288000
Hands employed daily	1400	5900	12600	12000

Caste and the Textile Industry

The role of caste in the textile industries is also very important. The majority of the chief merchants were the Chettis or Komattis, but some of them had also come from the weaving communities.¹³⁵ In fact, they controlled the textiles trade. The chief merchants made several contracts with the Company for providing finished cotton goods. Indeed, these merchants were the backbones of the textile industry. Of course, the weavers did definitely form the most important elements in the textiles industries. Among the weavers, *Kaikollar* caste played a very significant role. This caste was called the warrior merchants. Their roles in dispute between the Right and Left Hand castes were also very significant.¹³⁶ J.J. Bregnnig says that the weavers held a central position in the textile industry but the Europeans had very little direct contact with them.¹³⁷ However, such assumption is only partially true, for the English Records put that "It is ordered that pags 20,000 be paid to the honourable Company merchants to be delivered out ye weavers to keep them employed and to prevent their being concerned with the interlopers to hinder their pricing of cloths."¹³⁸ Further, it was said that the "Weavers and Washers [were] in employment for 3 or 4 months."¹³⁹ Moreover, the Company also encouraged to settle weavers and painters in their territory so that they could be used for weaving.¹⁴⁰

A list of the houses of some castes and the numbers of persons who inhabit are given in the records as:

Castes No. of Houses No. of persons.

1. Painters D. Qt	35	Men	100.
		Women	81.
		Total	181
2. Weavers D. Qt	20	Men	39.
		Women	36.
		Total :	95
3. Painters D. (Left Hand caste)	18	Men	44.
		Women	49.
		Total :	93
3. Chittys D. Qt	14	Men	33
		Women	30
		Total :	63

The above lists show the usefulness of the weavers and painters for the Company. However, weavers had to pay customs at the Choultry while painters were free from customs.¹⁴¹

Washerman were also important for cotton trade. The washermen's duties were "washing, whitening, congeeing, beating and curing all the honourable Company's cloths'".¹⁴² Peter Floris pointed out that weaving, bleaching, dyeing and paintings were practiced at all the centers.¹⁴³ The subsequent table also shows the structures of wages caste (bleachers and coolies role) in textile industries.¹⁴⁴

	Pagodas	Fanam	Cash
Beating		3	
Coolie hire for carrying		1	30
Brown cloth to washing place, do for carrying It back after it is washed		1	30
Coniplys wages		1	
Goats dung to rub the brown cloth for washing		1	
Chinam, soap and choud		8	
Fuel for bailing the cloth three times before well-wash		9	
Do. For boiling rice		1	
Indigo to prevent the red and brown spots in congee and cloth 1		10	40
		26	20
For every corge of long cloths washing rice allowed to the conge is measure 16, whereas the merchants accounts half thereof on their part and for the other half, 8 measures they receive in your positions account the value of it.		10	40
		1	60
Bleachers paid by the Company for washing 20 pieces bleachers profit1		5	
		4	20

the price of rice during the time the above price was fixed 5-6 pagodas for a grace.
The price now of rice 22-3 Pagodas for a grace

Thus, textile trade during the seventeenth century was the largest industry in the coromandel region and the role of the various caste groups were also very pivotal.

Shipping

As Madras was not a natural harbour it was not a major centre of shipping industry unlike Masulipatnam. Yet, in the early eighteenth century it began to attract some Indian shipping which was based in that port because the chief merchants who dealt with the English Company

had begun to pursue their overseas shipping interests. In the eighteenth century, some of the prominent merchants were known to have owned and operated shipping lines. Some of them were jointly operated with the English Company's servants. The Portuguese, Armenians and some free merchants were also involved in shipping. Some of the Madras ships participated in long-distance coastal trade, to destinations like Peru, Tenasserim, Bengal, South East Asia, Japan, China, Africa, Brazil, London and within the Indian Ocean countries. There were also small boats whose role was very significant. These small boats brought printed textiles from Madras to China, to South East Asia and so on.¹⁴⁵

The role of the caste groups in this trade was also very indispensable. The rich communities, like Komattis and Chettis, possessed many ships and participated in long distance trade. Some of the big ships were named through their owners, such as Venkatesh, Venkatalatchumi, Jailatchumi, Chindagiri, Terupathy and Arunachalan. There were also others ships which were identified by castes name such as 'Chetty', 'Komatties', 'Balija Chettis', 'Beri chetis', or 'Vyapari Chettis'. Some other ships were also identifiable by their links to the English Company as 'Dubashes' 'Kanakapillas' and 'Polygars'.¹⁴⁶

K.N. Chaudhari has also pointed out that fishermen, coral-divers, boat-builders, rope-maker, and net-menders always settled near the sea. Their childhood starts with the connection of the sea and it continued through the hard toils of an entire lifetime. Such people were found everywhere and at every port. They were the original boatmen who found, in the sea, their daily sustenance. In the social hierarchy, the position of the fishermen was very low. Thomas Bowrey noticed that the caste of fishermen in the Coromandel Coast called the "*Machus*" were regarded as the lowest among the Hindu untouchable and lived separately from other people.¹⁴⁷

The role of boatmen was also very important. Especially the *Catamaran's* boatmen were naturally very significant. *Catamarans* or *Mussoalars* were very big boat, used by the *machus*. They were widely employed in transporting passengers and bulky goods.¹⁴⁸ Elijah Hoole, a missionary of the region in the eighteenth century, reported that the communication between the shipping and the shore was carried on exclusively by the *Musoala* boats and *Catamarans*. He said, "The boats which were from twenty to thirty feet in length, six feet depth/breadth were constructed of strong planks, bent by means of fire; stitched together through hole drilled all round the edges with threads or chord of coir the outer fibrous covering of the coconut—inside the boat, the stitched enclose a sort of caulking or wadding of straw, rendering the seams water-tight... *Mussoala* boat was generally

manned by ten hands; eight men at the oars, one at the helm and one boy to the water...During strike the boat they sing a song together".¹⁴⁹ However, carpenters, caulkers, sailors (lascars), general labourers (coolies) and blacksmiths were employed heavily at shipping industry. From fifty to a hundred persons were employed at each yard.¹⁵⁰

The *Kammalan* caste was immensely important for the Company. For instance, carpenters knew that ship should be 6 inches in water for 12 hours. The carpenters were very knowledgeable about the sea-worthiness of the shipping they constructed. For instances, one English record mentioned that "we asked him how this ship came to want so much caulking he said he lay a long time on the west coast and rode out several great storms that she being a new ship it was usual for a new ship to want more caulking than a ship on a second voyage. The carpenter desired us to note it is not usual to fit ships here for a voyage home and that his place is not convenient for it because he must reap off the carts of the lower whales to come to the seam under them and to search the butts and scarf of both the whales and that in all new ships it is necessary so to do else the goods will be damaged...We asked him in how long time the ship could be fit to take in goods and have all that work done, he spoke of and what other work should be necessary he said in 20 days more but if the weather were favourable than in 17 or 18 days for he said that work must be done upon a stage, we asked him if he could not work on a stage now, he desired us to go about the ship in a boat and see it we could then stand upon a stage. Whence upon Mr. Pyke desired the carpenter to go in the Yawl with Mr. Catwright and Mr. Murray who went and looked at the ship whales afore and abaft and when they came in were asked if they thought any man could work on a stage in such weather, they said that after the change of the moon fairer weather and smoother water might be expected but that the ship must be lighted more and heeled."¹⁵¹

Thus, we have seen that in shipping trade various castes were involved. Some of them were merchants in true sense, some as sort of merchants who actively participated in trade.

Slave Trade

Although, English Company literally denounced the practice of slave trade unlike the Portuguese and other Companies, such practices were prevalent in the town of Madras during our period of study. In 1792, British rule forbid slave trades in any forms in their colonial empire. Those who dealt with slaves will be considered as thief

and be punished according to the law. The purchasers were to be similarly treated. Despite such stringent rules slave trade was clandestinely practiced in Madras. Many instances of stealing and transportation of persons for slave trade were noticed by the English records.¹⁵² Edgar Thurston recognised fifteen kinds of slavery:¹⁵³

1. Those born of female slaves.
2. Those purchased for a price.
3. Those found by chance.
4. Slaves by descend.
5. Those fed and kept alive in famine time.
6. Those given up as a pledge for money borrowed.
7. Those binding themselves for money borrowed (Indentured Labour).
8. Those captured in the battle fields (P.O.W.).
9. Those unable to pay gambling debts.
10. Those becoming slaves of their own wish.
11. Apostates from a religious life.
12. Slaves for a limited period.
13. Slaves for subsistence.
14. Those who for love of slave women become slaves.
15. By voluntary sale of liberty.

Edgar Thurston emphasised that the first four could never obtain their liberty without the consent of their owners.¹⁵⁴

The English Company employed slaves not for purpose of trade but for routine functions and for palanquin bearers, coolies and so on. Every Governor and subordinate officers of the English had slaves.¹⁵⁵ These slaves came from Brazil, Africa upon exchange of textiles. Within Madras, slaves were largely employed. For instance, Fort St. George records mentioned that every year the traders exported in large numbers slaves who were mostly stolen in the villages in which children constitute a majority of them. It was done by professional traders. Therefore, the Company ordered that no more slaves should be sent off the shore again.¹⁵⁶ Records of 1687 for the month of September revealed a striking instance of torture and the magnitude of slave trade carried in Madras. In September 1687, alone 665 slaves were exported from Madras.¹⁵⁷ These periods basically were the famine years when many people sold themselves to the Europeans in order to avoid the pangs of death. All diary and consultations book of Fort St. George records maintained the slave registers in the warehouse. Therefore, slaves were treated as commodities and employed for their daily uses. Hence, it could be said that slave trade was practiced in one form or the other.

Other Trades

Madras imported many things such as rice, pepper, elephants and varieties of spices, bullion, varieties of wine, paddy, betel and tobacco. For instance, records say that "we yearly lay up stores of paddy and pork for fear of troubles from the country, and buy in plank and timbers and several other stores, which when we find have no occasion, for we dispose of them as opportunity presents."¹⁵⁸ English Company might be involved in growing paddy in Madras like, "Suncah Ramah & c. renters of the paddy fields pay into cash pagodas seven hundred and ten in full of a years rent of that cowle ends. The 16th January last."¹⁵⁹

The imported grains in Madras during 1712-13 are given below:¹⁶⁰

1. Rice and other food grains imported by sea 3,603 garce @35 pagodas per grace. 126,105 pagodas.
 2. Paddy imported by sea 1,331 Garce @25 pagodas per Garce. 33,280 pagodas.
 3. Paddy brought in by renters by land and sold in city 2,003 Garce @20 pagodas per Garce. 40,000 pagodas.
 4. Paddy brought in renters by land and consumed 1,500 garce @ 20 pagodas per grace. 30,000 pagodas.
- Total Value: 209,445 pagodas. [219,385].

However, rent of the paddy fields per annum was 710 pagodas.¹⁶¹ Moreover, according to Company's record, all grounds were cultivated for paddy. It indicates that paddy became very important crop in Madras.

Pepper was also an important spice which was sent by voyages.¹⁶² Pepper was purchased from Sumatra and on account of this they send good quantities of cloth and other goods.¹⁶³ Candy Pepper was also imported from the West Coast, that is Malabar Coast.¹⁶⁴ Thus, pepper was very important spice imported by Madras regularly.

About betel and tobacco fort St. George records mentioned, "The farms of betel, tobacco, *ganjee* and expired 15th December the farmers much in arrears having encouraged the planting beetle gardens, 5 or 6 being in perfection which the leaves being small pay but half custom, the farmers complain of the gardens and desire abatements; shall adjust all when the ships once gone: it will be difficult to keep up the farms as formerly let and fear must take them into company's hands."¹⁶⁵ Company probably took heavy rents as betel, tobacco and arrack farms were not agreed to pay more than 6,000 pagodas.¹⁶⁶ Betel and tobaccos farmer's conditions were not good as records says "They having houses goods nor chattels to make any satisfaction."¹⁶⁷

Apart from that many metals were imported from Europe.¹⁶⁸ Elephants were also imported as records says, "The imported for this two years last past were not of half the value they used to be by reason the owners would gladly have sold them at almost any rate rather than at so great an expense (for rice is their chief diet)."¹⁶⁹ The Company also imported wine although it was only for their uses. The wines were Gallicia wine, claret, canary, palm, White Lisbon, Rhenish, Sherry, Cider, Burton Ale, Bottle beer, Ditto Small, Cask beer, Ditto, Cheese, Pipes and Tobacco.¹⁷⁰

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