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# Right and Left Hand Castes Disputes in Madras in the Early Part of the 18th Century.

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## **Right and Left Hand Castes Disputes in Madras in the Early Part of the 18th Century.**

(By C. S: Srinivasachari, M.A.)

### *1.-Introductory.-The Great Quarrel of 1707.*

After the advance of Daud Khan to San Thome with ten thousand troops in July 1701, in a very threatening manner, and when six months later the Nawab set up an actual blockade of the Settlement, the Governor set about a more active pursuit of the fortifications of Black Town which were planned as early as 1699 and for which the several castes of the population were assessed. Records of the succeeding three years show instalments paid in by the inhabitants and their meetings at the Pagoda for the purpose of distributing the burden. On the 26th June 1701 the Council recorded a recent dispute between the two divisions about the passing through some streets on occasions of their weddings; and the Governor was obliged to order guards to lie out to keep the peace. This happened immediately after the sale of the Company's broad cloth to some members of the Left Hand faction and the purchase from them of some goods in open sale at the Sea Gate,<sup>1</sup> thus affording the Company's servants freedom of selecting goods in open competition and obtaining them at lower prices and choosing them from a greater variety. It was ordered that the Company's Pay-Master and the Governor should take with them two heads from each of the factions and survey the pettahs and "consider of what method may be taken to prevent any further disputes of the like nature and report the same to the Governor and Council". The report was subsequently made by these showing that they had surveyed the place and indicated the respective streets where the two factions mainly lived and the Council ordered (Consultation of Thursday, 17th July) that a few of the Right Hand who lived in the streets of the Left side should sell their houses and prohibited the Right Hand from disturbing the quiet enjoyment of those streets by the Left. And it was further ordered "that neither caste may pretend ignorance of these limits, that the Pay-Master sets up four stones at the cost of the Left Hand caste, according as we have directed him in the draught, and insert; thereon in English and Gentoe the purport of this order."

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<sup>1</sup> Up to this time the practice seems to have been to procure the Company's goods through the agency of Indian brokers who contracted to supply them according to sample and received *dadni* (advance, from Per. *Dadan-give*) for payment of the wages of the weavers and others employed in the manufacture. The brokers and merchants who contracted were for the most part members of the right Hand Caste, like the chief merchant, Casa Verona. These were suspected of having paid large subsidies to some of the earlier Governors for this privilege. Recently the practice was begun of encouraging all classes of merchants to bring their own goods for sale and to enable the Company to take advantage of their competition. This change of policy, whether suggested by Pitt or not, was "the immediate cause of the outbreak of the smouldering antagonism between the two divisions". Pitt wrote to Sir Edmund Harrison in December 1707, after the riots had been put down, thus: "- The grounds of these dissensions and what lead the Right Hand Caste into this hellish conspiracy, I find to be that it had firmly been

This decision of the Council was an unanimous one; but the Right Hand faction took umbrage at this, and, on the night of the 12th August, placed papers on the stones in the Malabar (Tamil) language to the effect that the pillars were erected by the authority of Government and "the prevalence of money to the contempt and division of the Right Hand caste" and that this was written " by the will of the King of England and the Company who will not fail to bring these things to pass; and this by way of caution."

The Council inferred that some Europeans should have had a hand in the drafting of this notice "there being (in it) expressions that these people were wholly strangers to ". The heads of the Right Hand denied the charge and were given a month's time to find out the culprits. Three days later the Right Hand caste people conducted a wedding procession through one of the prohibited streets on: which the Governor sent out a party of soldiers who seized some of the offenders and kept them in the Choultry prison. On the 19th August the Right Hand castes presented a petition to the Council - "the Petition of the 18 sorts of people of the Right Hand caste belonging to Chinapatnam" - in which it was asserted that the two streets in which the stones had been put up had been exclusively inhabited by the Right Hand people from the first settlement of the Fort until the French troubles at San Thome during the Governorship of Sir William Langhorne (1670-78) when several immigrants from San Thome had built their houses in both the Pettahs indiscriminately. The Left Hand faction had not retired to their own streets even to the present time; but they could not celebrate any marriage with any music in the streets wherein there were more than a hundred houses of the Right Hand people. (pp. 52 and 53 of *Fort St. George Diary and Consutation Book for 1707*).

The next day the Governor reported that most .of the Right Hand caste were gone out of town disliking what we have done in point of justice to the Left Hand caste. Calloway and Vinkette Chittees, heads of the Left Hand castes, acquainted the Board that the differences between the two factions were "more upon account of

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practised among them that the Left Hand Caste could not make any bargains, or buy any goods unless one ,of the Right Hand were joined with them to direct their Shairs, so that they governed the trade as they thought fit, and the Company's investment fell generally under their management . . . . I put up papers upon the Sea Gate and other public places, to encourage all merchants indifferently to bring in in goods to be sorted by the Company's musters, and would agree the price and pay them ready money for them but this tryall had not the effect I desired. The Left Hand Caste (who are the only merchants that can serve you in this method) being intimidated by the threats of the Right and overaw'd by 'em, and upon receiving your order to advance no money or payment upon Investments, I took care to publish it among 'em and that we could not recede from the directions you had given us, upon which some of the most eminent merchants of the Left prevailed upon by the assurance of our protecting and defending them against the insults of the other, undertook the providing goods in the manner you direct (and indeed none else could have done it) upon which the Right Hand, upon seeing their designs defeated and that the reigns of trade were no longer in their hands, fell upon this barbarous attempt to regain it, industriously spreading false rumours amongst the poor and ignorant people to cause them to desert us .... " *Hedges' Diary*; Vol. III, Documentary Contributions to a Biography of Thomas Pitt, page 113.)

their making the investment for the Company than that of the streets and till these disputes were over nothing could be done." On the day when the petition was presented to the Council, William Fraser, who was a member of the Council but had been under suspension even on Pitt's arrival and whose official role seemed "to have been to thwart and irritate the Governor for the time being", posed as the champion of the Right Hand, putting forward the some points that were contained in the petition. The Governor charged him with having made it or read it which he denied with confusion. Two days later, after many of the Right Hand people deserted the town, particularly boatmen, fishermen, washermen, and other necessary handicraftsmen, the Governor summoned all his Council except Mr. Fraser and suspended him *ab officio et beneficia*, lest he might do further mischief and recorded other circumstances indicative of his hostile temper and attitude.

Three days after Fraser's suspension the Governor summoned a meeting of 12 of the principal heads of the two factions and shut them up in a room at the Fort to see whether they could not come to an agreement. The desired agreement was quickly come to. It declared that the Right Hand should live in Peddunaickenpetta and the Left Hand in Muthialpetta. Time was given for the transfer of the castes who might be living in the prohibited pettas to their own; in neither petta no one should sell his house to anyone who was not of his own side. Boatmen, lascars, and fishermen that had their houses by the sea side in Muthialpetta should remain where they now were, without giving any molestation to the Left Hand people.<sup>2</sup> This was a concession to the Right Hand who were to under-take to make all of their side who had withdrawn from the Settlement to return without delay. On the 29th August the Governor published a general pardon to such of the deserters as might return before the 10th of September, after taking security from the heads of the two divisions that they would stand by the agreement arrived at. Nothing transpired even after the issue of the pardon; and on the 10th of September the obnoxious stones which were at the bottom of the trouble were slyly removed and the Right Hand side deserters wrote from San Thome " a most saucy and impudent letter" in which the Council were asked to examine the earlier records for the allotment of streets to the two castes thus – "One of your predecessors with Timmanna and Viran did appoint certain streets of the Left Hand Caste and directed how they should act as upon your Consultation Book does appear, upon examination whereof advantage would accrue to the Company which you have hitherto omitted to do."

A meeting of the Council was summoned the next day [15 Sep.] when the Governor

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<sup>2</sup> There is a confusion in Dalton's account of the compromise effected. He confuses the petta with a street. The two pettas, Pedunaickenpetta and Muthialpetta, were respectively the homes of the Right and Left Hands. For the growth of Old Black Town and the Pettas see the author's "Stagas in the Growth of Madras City" in the *Journal of the Madras Geographical Association*, Vol. II, No.3.

charged Fraser with being at the bottom of the whole business. He was ordered to be confined in the Fort and given into the charge of the Captain of the Guard. (Consultation of 16th September).

After a week the Governor and Council granted a pardon to the Right Hand Caste at the request of the Persian and Armenian mediators who offered to deliver the pardon to the refractory deserters and accompany them on their return. But when the deserters had nearly reached Madras they changed their minds and returned again to San Thome and even took with them by force one of the mediators. The failure of the pardon drove Pitt to extreme fury; the Pariahs who had always the reputation of being the foremost champions of the Right Hand had forced the offenders to turn back from Madras and Pitt proposed to attack San Thome with a force on the 26th and to put as many of the Right Hand as possible to sword; this was unanimously agreed to by the Council and it was resolved to march a body of soldiers and *taliars* (watchmen) besides a large number of peons which the Left Hand had raised for their own security. This measure alarmed the Persian and Moor merchants as well as the Pedda Naick<sup>3</sup> who declared that the new Faujdar of San Thome could be prevailed upon to turn the deserters out of his town; and consequently the intended attack was postponed.

The deserters insisted on signing a paper that they would return only on condition that " they may have leave to rebel when they please " and should stand by one another for the saving of their credit, if the Governor should act contrary to his Cowle or the Left Hand should take upon them more than their duty. On the 2nd October it was reported that the deserters had been induced to return and would be coming back the next day or the day after.

On the 4th the new Faujdar of San Thome who was of the Right Hand division and anxious to get rid of the mob from his place, succeeded in bringing back the deserters to Madras with the assurance that their pardon would be kept inviolate. On the 6th the Faujdar was given a suitable present for his services and Fraser was released from his confinement and the trouble seemed to have ended for all appearances. After a fortnight's quiet, the Consultations tell us, the washermen put in a petition that their heads combined with diverse others of the Balijawarr caste and compelled them to desert their town and homes and disown these headmen and declared that they would have no heads or chiefs except the Governor and Council. They then presented four heads of their own choosing "which we approved of and "tashereeff". (honoured) them, when the whole body signed a paper which is as entered after this Consultation". (P. C., dated 20th October).

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<sup>3</sup> He was the hereditary police-officer for the Black Town; and a petta came to be called after him. He "officially styled the Chief Talliar" or Watchman

An anonymous paper which disowned for the Right Hand Caste people any hand in the late happenings and charged five persons as being the sole contrivers of the late rebellion was found fixed on the Bridge Gate. The latter denied knowing anything of it, as well as the heads of the Right Hand Castes. The next day four papers were found fixed on the outside of the bastions of the Inner Fort<sup>4</sup>, the purport of which being full of the most opprobrious language against the Governor, charging him to be the author of the *cadjan* (palm-leaf) letter- read yesterday." A week later the Governor produced a paper (from the Left Hand Castes) in the Gentoo language signed by President Baker, Agent Greenhill and Mr. Gurney in 1652 for composing differences between the two factions -- the translation of which is given in the Consultation for 30th of October. On the 6th of November a petition of the Left Hand faction was read in Council, praying for speedy justice or for permission to go away at the end of six months. The petition is at great length detailing the origin and progress of the quarrel. It says that, since the Right Hand had two streets in Peddunaickenpetta taken from them, they resolved to send away the washers, boatmen, etc., to hinder goods and provisions coming into the town, bribed the *Junkan mettas* (customs collectors) at Mylapore and at Poonamalle and aimed at impeding the despatch of the Company's ship for England. It then proceeds "the four castes of your petitioners contributed one-half towards the tax of the Town Wall, and the other half was in a manner raised by the Moors, Armenians, Brahmans, Gujaratis and Kanakkupillais who are an indifferent people, and the small matter which remained unpaid was filled up by the Right Hand Castes. All the handicrafts of the Mint are of your Petitioners' Caste."

Articles of charge against Mr. Fraser were framed on the 28th of November for promoting, fomenting, and abetting the late rebellion and for spreading false rumours of similar unrest in Fort St. David and besides throwing in his teeth his tenure of the Deputy Governorship of Fort St. David where he wrought intense confusion.

The heads of the Mukkuvars (boatmen) who had deserted along with the Right Hand people, now sent in a petition that, being Christians, they belonged to neither caste and promised never to adhere to any castes of the Gentoos or desert their employers upon any account. (P. Consultations for December 2nd.)

At a meeting of the Council on the 15th January 1708, it was recorded that "the heads of both castes having been for some days in the Pagoda, this day appeared before us when (they) acquainted us that they had settled all matter in dispute between them about their streets, etc., which they had put in writing and signed". Also we read that "both castes complain against the Kaicullawarr

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<sup>4</sup> For the growth of the Inner and Outer Forts, see Love's Descriptive List of Pictures in Government House, Madras (pp. 11-35).

(Weavers) and the Oil-men that they were very fickle in their castes, that they were some times of one caste and some times of another, which give trouble to both castes, so desired the heads may be sent for which accordingly was done, when the weavers declared for the Left Hand and the Oil-men for Right Hand which they were ordered to keep to or be severely punished". The agreement is entered after the consultation; it involved the interchange of upward of 500 houses between the two parties which was done according to estimates made by four bricklayers and four carpenters. Should any of the castes act contrary to the agreement, it should be fined 12,000 pagodas to be paid to the Company and receive punishment according to the custom of the caste.

This agreement provides that certain streets in Peddunaickenpetta should be reserved for the Left Hand people extending from the east of Ekambareswarar Pagoda to the back of Venkatanarayanappa's stone choultry and Golla Annitcher's House northward to Empson's Gardens, the space forming a square. "The area is believed to embrace that part of the petta which lies south of the existing (Town) Chennai Kesava Perumal Temple and east of Mint Street. The routes to be followed by the wedding and burial processions are defined, it is difficult to indentify them". The streets to the east of Nautwaree Pilliar Pagoda were to appertain entirely and solely to the Right Hand caste and all the westward to the Left Hand; and Ekambareswarar Pagoda and Venkatanarayanappa's stone choultry were to be freely used by both parties. Either caste breaking the agreement was to pay 12, 000 pagodas to the Company and be punished at the discretion of Government.<sup>5</sup>

### ***II.-Other caste disputes in the History of Madras.***

There was, after the great incident of Governor Pitt's time, a threatened collision between the two factions in Governor Macrae's time (1725-30) Macrae was successful in persuading the disputants to accept arbitration regarding the newly erected Kachalisvarar Pagoda through the mediation of the Peddanaick and some Armenian and Mussalman merchants.

In 1749 a dispute again occurred between the two divisions, shortly after the rendition of the place to the English by the French. The heads of the castes had

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<sup>5</sup> Pitt was greatly troubled by this protracted dispute. He wrote in one his letters about this as follows: - " I never met with soe knotty a villany in my life, nor ever with anything that gave me soe much trouble and perplexity as this has done". Dalton would exonerate Pitt from all blame in his conduct of affairs during this critical period and declared that" without bloodshed or any act of violence in spite of the treachery of his Second in Command (Fraser) and the opposition of the Right Hand caste who were far more powerful than their opponents, he succeeded in carrying out the very salutary reformation of the Company's trade which the Court of Directors had ordered. (*Life of Thomas Pitt*, page 333.)

to be shut up in the White Town for the night and parties of soldiers constantly patrolled the streets of Black Town to overawe the populace (P. C. for 2nd March 1750). The dispute was over the claim put forward by the Right Hand that such portion of Black Town as was demolished by the French might retain its former distinction of streets and the Left Hand people be not suffered to pass over where the Right Hand streets had been. The Council resolved to act on the basis of the settlement made in the time of Pitt and Macrae and obtained the experience of Mr. Morse in effecting a settlement which settled the streets, etc., to be enjoyed by, the two factions in the demolished parts. Two years later another decision was arrived at by the Council with regard to the use of the Black Town Esplanade.

Differences between the two divisions arose in 1786 shortly after the accession of Sir Archibald Campbell to the Governorship. The origin of the present dispute was in the old question of passage across the Esplanade. The Left Hand complained that their rivals assumed a mark of distinction "to which they are not entitled, going to the Fort, when sent for by the Hon'ble Governor, with tom-tom, and spoon and bell, contrary to custom ever since the settlement was established." It was then decided that the Esplanade should be common passage for all persons. In the next year a dispute occurred with reference to the Tiruvottiyur Pagoda, which was managed by a Left Hand man where the Left complained of interference with their ceremonies by the Right and of molestation by the Pariahs. In March there was a rioting in Black Town which was quelled by the guard with some loss of life and after many houses were plundered. Government directed the Committee of Regulation to make an exhaustive inquiry and furnish them with extracts from the Records of previous disturbances in 1707, 1708, 1716, 1728, 1750, 1752, 1753, and 1771. "The disposal of the matter does not appear in the Consultations."

The next dispute occurred at San Thome which had come into English possession in 1749 on the subject of flags used in a temple festival (November 1789). The Right Hand here complained of interference. There ensued a general strike; and the Left Hand explained that "they were entitled to use silk pendants of five colours on cords stretched across the streets while the Right could only display white banners". They stated that when in 1771 the Right had the insolence to adopt colours, Governor Du Pre ordered that for the future the Company's colour of flag only might be used by both parties". There was again a riot in January 1790 at the same place; and the Consultation of the 13th April of that year ordered that in future no flag should be used by either party at San Thome during their feasts or ceremonies except St. George's Flag, "as ordered by this Government in the year 1771 and according to the custom observed throughout the Black Town of Madraspatnam and in other places."



In September of the same year the Right Hand hoisted their white flags as well as the prohibited colours of the Left in the newly built Krishnaswami temple in the Black Town. There was the usual crop of disturbances and strikes and Government re-issued its proclamation forbidding the display of any flag but the St. George's. Mutual complaints of ill-treatment and assault came in; and a Consultation of the 17th September declared that both the factions had transgressed the orders of Government in using other flags besides St. George's flag. "The Left Hand caste having at different times used flags with the figure of a peacock and bull and the Right Hand caste having used those flags besides the monkey and the kite". Government also resolved to inquire into the allegation that the Left Hand had used brass cups over their chariots (cars) which was an innovation; and the heads of both divisions were commanded to enter into penalty bonds for the good behaviour of their respective castes. The next day more petitions were received in which their confiscated flags for the completion of their interrupted procession and the Right Hand had the temerity to ask for the return (by Government) or they concluded that from the time of Governor Pitt the Left Hand people had never been allowed to have their pyramid chariots adorned with brass cups. Government promised a full enquiry after the security bonds should have been signed. (Consultation of 21st September).

In 1795 there was a recrudescence of the trouble, this time regarding the disturbances raised by the Left Hand in a procession of the Ekambareswarar Pagoda and during the annual festival of the place. There were counter complaints about the disturbances made by the Right Hand men. The custom was that the procession of both the Ekambareswarar Pagoda and the Town Temple should be admitted without opposition into the streets of both the factions. The Government ordered that the heads of the Left Hand should be confined in the main guard until they should produce the offenders. (Consultation dated 31d March 1705).

Later disputes occurred sporadically; and the intensity and bitterness of faction considerably diminished in the nineteenth century. Now these Hands and factions are but dimly remembered as things of the past.

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