

## SCHOLARLY VIEW ON TAMILS - A CENTURY AGO

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An excerpt from the *Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* provides a brief sketch retrospectively of Tamils and of their geo-physical territory. Fag-end of this essay effectively counsels the contemporary Tamils as to how they should behave and keep themselves in good stead.

The Tamils belong to a prosperous nation settled in the extreme south of the peninsula of India. Their country was bounded on three sides by the sea and on the north by the territories of lesser known races, such as the Konkanas, Kalingas and Rattas. These races must be regarded as less civilized than the Tamils, as they had no literature of their own, and the Tamils proudly spoke of their language as "the Southern tongue" and of the Aryan as "the Northern tongue". They were known as the Tamils most probably because they had emigrated from Tamilitti (Tamralipti) the great seaport at the mouth of the Ganges. Their kings and chieftains still remembered the original Monogolian stock from which they had sprung, and called themselves Vanavar or "Celestials". They had conquered the country from the ancient Nagas, and driving them into barren and desert tracts, occupied all the fairest and most fertile portions of the sunny land. Being the conquerors of the land, and ruled by princes of their own race, they had a high opinion of themselves, and were proud of their nationality. They had grown wealthy by their agriculture, manufacture and commerce; and they enjoyed so much security of life and property in the fortified cities, that the higher classes were not afraid of displaying their wealth by their rich dress and costly jewelry. They were a gay and polite people, passionately fond of music and flowers and poetry. Their bards sang of the

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\* A reputed Historian who has written in English *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*. This has been rendered into Tamil and undergone many Editions. Source: V.Kanakasabhai, 1904. *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*. (Second AES Reprint, 1989), New Delhi:Asian Educational Services.

thrilling achievements, by field and flood, of their gallant ancestors who had won Tamilakam for them: and stimulated in them a noble desire to be loyal to their kings, to labour for the good of the poor and the helpless, and above all to love truth and righteousness and to adore their gods.

Sixty generations have passed since the period I describe and what mighty changes have occurred in this interval! The land has extended, rivers have changed their courses, the ancient cities have disappeared and new languages have been formed by sections of the Tamil people. The alluvial deposits which accumulated every year, during the monsoons, at the mouths of the large rivers gradually extended the land as may be seen from the map of India in which the coast line projects into the sea at the mouths of the rivers Godavari, Kaviri, Vaigai, and Tamraparani. Some of the rivers have changed their courses owing to natural or artificial causes.

The ancient capitals of the Chera, Chola and Pandyan kingdoms are now in ruins, and their very sites are forgotten. Scattered remains of massive walls incrustated with moss and lichen still attest the solid fortifications of Karur or Vanji, the chief town of the Chera King. The wealthy and populous city of Kavirippattinam, which was the capital of the Cholas, lies buried under vast mounds of sand in the stagnant pools between which may be seen a solitary stork feeding on fish or frogs. Shepherds graze their flocks on the site of old Madura where the proud Pandya had sat on his high throne surrounded by a brilliant conclave of ministers, warriors and learned poets.

The Tamils who inhabited the Western Coast and the table land of Mysore, which were separated from the rest of the country by high mountains, differed in their speech from the main body of the Tamils, so much in course of time that their languages became distinct dialects of Tamils, and in this manner the modern Malayalam and Canarese languages have been formed. Consequently the limits of Tamilakam have become much narrower than they were found formerly. The Tamil land may now be defined as the low country east of the Ghauts between Tirupathi and Cape Comorin. The Northern portion of the island of Ceylon, where the Tamils are settled for the last eight centuries, may also be now regarded as a part of the Tamil-land. Even within these narrow limits, the Tamils were many a time in danger of being overwhelmed by other races, but a merciful Providence appears to have arrested every invading force before it could completely overrun the country. The Canarese, the Moguls, the

Telugu Naicks, the Mahrattas and the Mahomedan adventurers of the Dekhan successively invaded the Tamil country within the last six centuries, and threatened to destroy every vestige of Tamils; but at last a sterner and superior race of pale - faced men dropped, as it were from the clouds, and saved the Tamils and all other races of India from anarchy and misrule. They had sailed from a far-off land, over perilous seas, in search of new markets for their trade.

The Tamils now enjoy profound peace and present the unique spectacle of a race of people who have retained their language and civilization almost unchanged for the last two thousand years or more.

Socially and politically however the Tamils of this day present a mournful contrast to their warlike ancestors.

The Tamils still retain however many of their old characteristics. They are devoted to friends, respectful to women, charitable to the poor, fervent in poetry and tireless in industry. "Wherever money is to be made, wherever a more apathetic or a more aristocratic people are willing to be pushed aside, thither" says Caldwell a European Missionary who long resided among them".

Swarm the Tamils, the Greeks or Scotch of the east: the least superstitious and the most enterprising and persevering race of Hindus". They are still the most literate people among the native race of India. An enlightened Government has covered the land with a network of roads, railway and telegraphs: it provided the best possible codes of law which are administered without distinction of caste or creed: it has opened schools and hospitals, and organized all sorts of Government Departments. The Tamils should now awake from their apathy of ages, if they wish to reap the full benefit of these changes. They should realize the fact that they are now at the parting of the ways. Mistakes now made will be irretrievable, and will have far reaching effects. For instance, they fail to see the utter folly of retaining the caste system any longer.

If they throw off the fetters of caste, which estrange the sympathy of one class from another and paralyze the genius and industry of the people: if they educate their women and train them to be intelligent wives and mothers: if they open technical schools and encourage scientific research: if they introduce machinery for their manufactures, remembering the fact that workmen cannot possibly compete with machinery: and if they reform their religion, giving up idolatry and sectarian prejudices and make Hinduism the true workshop of living God, they would assuredly prosper, and as part of the great Hindu nation

they may rank with the foremost nations of the world. The men of light and leading need not wait till some one sets an example: but if they quietly and steadily instill these ideas into their families and circle of relations, and carry them out in practice, as far as it is possible, without causing any violent commotion, their names would be handed down to distant generations, as the saviours of their community.

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