Tamil Brahmins are (un)likely to fade away

V. Sriram

Chief Librarian, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram
E-mail: vsrirams@gmail.com


Tamil Brahmin community are privileged people. That is how members of other communities perceive them. However; the truth is that Tamil Brahmins value education and righteousness and strive to make a living accordingly. During the colonial era; when merit reigned, Tamil Brahmins prospered a lot by moving from villages to cities and towns. This movement from an agrarian community to a middle class modern community has been an arduous one. Post independence, when merit was pushed aside and reservation came to the front, Tamil Brahmins took a heavy beating. But Tamil Brahmins again evolved from a bureaucracy based middle class to a migrant techno-industry based modern middle class. In this journey; according to some elders; Tamil Brahmins lost their identity as scholars and keepers of traditional knowledge and wisdom. Even now, we see that the members of the community still uphold the values of truth and honesty. The importance given to proper and best education is still followed. And the importance of living in peace is also still believed to be essential. The motto followed so far by the Tamil Brahmins has been “Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavanthu”, and will continue to be so. But will the community survive in this fast developing world? In this context is it interesting to read a latest publication that throws light into the colourful but difficult journey of Tamil Brahmins from what they were 100 years ago to what they are today.

The book “Tamil Brahmins: The Making of a Middle-Class Caste” is based on an ethnographic study which looks in depth into how Tamil Brahmins became representatives of modernity. It is written in a lucid descriptive style by C. J. Fuller, Emeritus Professor at London School of Economics, and Haripriya Narasimhan, Assistant Professor at Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad. It is the result of about 8 years of ethnographic research and follow-up study conducted by the authors in various locations in Tamil Nadu and other places in India and abroad. It is divided into seven chapters dealing with different aspects, a detailed introduction and a very useful appendix on demographics.

The book opens with an excellent introduction to Tamil Brahmins. The Tamil Brahmins' evolution as and integration into Indian middle class is vividly portrayed with the help of several real instances. Further, the impact of non-Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu and the sociology of class is discussed in detail. According to the authors, the ethnographic research was carried out between 2003 and 2008 and its follow up was conducted up to 2010. The research data, absence of statistics and the reasons for the same are also explained in detail. The methodology adopted for research, writing and
collaboration between the authors and other associates are also presented. The advantages, disadvantages and limitations of the study are also explained with clarity. The introduction closes with a section explaining the outline of the book. The introduction is comprehensive in itself stating the origin, evolution, situations, of the Tamil Brahmins. For those who do not have time to read the entire book, reading the introduction will give a quick preview about the contents of the book.

First chapter is about the life in the villages. The Brahmin residential areas (Agraharams), the village structure, hierarchy of caste and class system followed, the characteristics of dwellings of castes in villages and so on are explained. Further, the social separation observed by Brahmins, their changing attitude towards land (from nineteenth century), and the reasons for the same, the patterns of urban migration among Brahmins are also discussed in detail. This chapter closes with a subsection on caste status, ritual purity and moral conduct followed in urban areas. Thus in the first chapter, we see the historical roots and the changes to modern livelihood along with the reasons that lead Tamil Brahmins to follow the same.

Education and employment are the most crucial factors in this study. These aspects in the Colonial context are discussed in Chapter 2, and post independence context in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2, we can see how after the initial state of urban migration Tamil Brahmins consolidate and improve on their predecessors education and employment status. The Tamil Brahmin community gave high importance to good education. The statistics provided for that of high schools, colleges (including professional colleges), and universities, reveal the position of community and the importance that education received. Consequently, in whatever occupations, a reasonable standard of school / college education was necessary and the operational language was English, the members of the community began to make their presence felt. They have been able to occupy and secure white collar as well as high ranking positions in organizations and governments. This overwhelming lead in modern education and urban employment established by Tamil Brahmins by the end of nineteenth century was a highly significant development. This chapter also includes very short biographical sketches of three prominent personalities, viz. The self taught mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, and the noted physicists and Nobel Laureates Sir C. V. Raman and his nephew Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar. It also discusses three family trees. The first one is that of Sir Seshia Sastri (1828-1903), who served as dewan of Travancore, and regent & dewan of Pudukottai. The second family tree discussed is that of Sir V. T. Krishnamachari (1881-1964), who served as dewan of Baroda and Jaipur, the then delegate to League of Nations and United Nations, and lastly as Deputy Chairman on Planning Commission. Third family tree is that of the famous legal luminary Sir V. Bhashyam Iyengar (1844 – 1908). In all these cases, we see Tamil Brahmins largely departing from their ancestor's social role and way of life in order to join new administrative or legal elite. The ethnographical data available on ordinary urban migrants also depict the same picture of Tamil Brahmins educated in English and employed in modern, rationalized, bureaucratic systems of governance.

As the authors rightly point out, in 1900, an ambitious young Tamil Brahmin would probably have hoped to become a High Court Judge, but by 2000 he or she would be much more likely to aspire to the position of CEO of a major IT company. This change
and its consequences is at the heart of Chapter 3, where the authors discuss the education and employment after Independence. From the quota system of 1930s onwards the reservation policy of governments has greatly reduced the recruitment and presence of Tamil Brahmins in Government Service. As a result of this, Tamil Brahmins turned to Indian Central Government Services, and public sector organizations including banks as attractive sources of employment until the OBCs quotas were introduced after 1991. Indirectly, this lead to the migration of Tamil Brahmins towards Mumbai, Delhi, and other North Indian towns and cities. This migration widely dispersed Tamil Brahmins throughout India after Independence. After the opening up of the economy and the emergence of information technology sector the employment pattern of Tamil Brahmins saw further shift and migration to more locations including Bangalore in India and United States and several other countries. Simultaneously in the field of education, authors describe the shift from government educational institutions to private schools and colleges. We also see a marked shift towards engineering and technology courses in the last decades of the 20th century. As known, the authors also reveal that the medical profession never appealed to the Tamil Brahmins because of the government’s reservation policy and the severe competition in government medical college for general seats. Authors conclude that Tamil Brahmins as middle class who possessed the economic, social and cultural resources to ensure that their wards are well placed to secure the same kind of employment in open recruitment systems and move up in the class ladder.

The evolution of female education in relation to marriage and paid employment is examined in detail in the fourth chapter. Also it provides a lot of insights into the life of Tamil Brahmin women and the changes that occurred to them. The plaguing matter of child marriage that Tamil Brahmins gave up grudgingly, the slow but steady progress that was achieved in providing formal education to Tamil Brahmin girls, the penetration of Tamil Brahmin girls into the world of paid employment especially IT sector are discussed in detail. The authors are able to firmly conclude that at present there is a near parity between the genders. However, they also add that gender inequality has not completely vanished among Tamil Brahmins. Women always have to face the competing pressures of family, career, unequal division of domestic labour, and more moral surveillance than men. This chapter also includes a short biographical sketch of the noted social reformer and educationalist Smt. R. S. Subbalakshmi (1886 – 1969).

Chapter 5 presents the urban ways of life in Chennai, Bangalore, Mumbai, and the outer suburbs of American cities. According to the authors, almost all middle class Tamil Brahmins live and work in urban areas. And they are thorough urbanites and not ‘urban villagers’. They usually retain few links with their ancestral villages, and most of them know nothing about rural ways of life. Most of them; especially women; perceive villages as restrictive, gossipy, ultra orthodox and conservative strongholds. And they find the urban locations modern, less restrictive, flexible, liberal and relaxed. One central theme in this chapter is the contrast between Chennai which is seen to combine tradition and modernity, and Bangalore and Mumbai which are inimitably modern, and America which is thoroughly ultra modern. According to the authors the interviews with the select Tamil Brahmins in these cities reveal that they prefer to live there due to personal opportunities and liberties available. Even in the midst of their daily hectic life in these bustling cities across the globe, Tamil Brahmins are confident about their caste identity and way of life and try their maximum to adhere to it.
In chapter 6, the authors discuss the pre-eminent role of Tamil Brahmins as custodians of Sanskrit Hinduism. Under different subsections on carnatic music and Bharatanatyam the authors describe how the impact and contributions of Tamil Brahmins largely fashioned these two art forms into what they are today. Temples, domestic worship, rites of passage, and priesthood are dealt with in detail in this chapter by the authors. The worship performed regularly by Tamil Brahmins before the domestic shrine and in temples, celebration of festivals, ceremonies, observances of fasting and other religious matters are described very vividly. This chapter also includes a sub-section on the Shankaracharyas of Kanchipuram and Sringeri who are considered as ultimate gurus and spiritual guides to a wide majority of Tamil Brahmins in South India. The authors finally conclude that religion, music and dance are all vital components of the Brahminical, Sanskritic tradition as conceptualised by contemporary Tamil Brahmins.

The final chapter presents a comparative picture of Bengal, Bombay and Madras during the colonial period. Here the authors look at the Tamil Brahmins in a comparative context to see what is distinctive about both their modernity and their middle – class status. They reveal that during the colonial period these three provinces differed most in their contrasting paths of social, religious and political reform. The Brahmins forming part of bhadralok of Bengal, the two largest Maharashtrian Brahmin castes – Deshasthas and Chitpavans, and the Tamil and Telugu Brahmins in Madras differed widely in several ways. However, a common thread of gradual development to modernity and entry to urban middle class is evident in all of them. The authors also analyse other leading higher castes in India such as Kanya – Kubjas of Uttar Pradesh, Kashmiri Pundits, Kannada Brahmins, Saraswat Brahmins of Kanara, Nambudiri Brahmins and Nayars of Kerala since independence and arrive at the same result of urbanisation, modernisation and middle-class characteristics.

The Tamil Brahmin demographics are provided in the Appendix. An alarming rate of low population strength and a difficult level of negative demographic growth is being faced by the Tamil Brahmins. It is correct to assume that there is a clear lack of definite caste census data, because after 1931 caste based enumeration has not been attempted by the successive governments. The results of 2012 caste census are not yet published, nor do we have any idea or hope that it will ever be published. Till then, as rightly pointed out by the authors, we can only extrapolate the figures of 1931 census and arrive at certain assumptions, and it is only natural that such numbers will automatically become redundant once the caste census data of 2012 is published. Authors project the present number of Tamil Brahmins as 18.5 lakhs across the globe and within those 16.5 lakhs are in India. This is 0.026% of global population and 00.15% of Indian population respectively. It is a horrifying population trend.

The authors have done an excellent job of tracing the transformation of Tamil Brahmins from what they were 100 years ago to their present status. They have systematically analysed using various scientific methods and historical evidences the different aspects of the change and development that has happened to this community. How Tamil Brahmins became representatives of modernity is the central theme of this book. Based on the analysis of available data, authors are able to successfully establish their conclusion very firmly.
This book should inspire the future researchers to conduct more studies about the Tamil Brahmins. From our experience, the status of an ordinary forward caste citizen in this country is far from satisfactory. And the trend of migration among the Tamil Brahmin community for making a decent living still continues. When the might of the majority and the reservation system rules the country there is no future for merit and honesty. Therefore where the state fails, it becomes the duty of community as a whole, and the community organizations and associations in particular to take the lead in providing support to the deserving members of the community. Different organizations and associations working for the welfare and development of Tamil Brahmins in Kerala and other states should come forward to conduct similar studies to understand the correct status of the members of the community. Such studies should comprise of comprehensive data gathering from all members of the Tamil Brahmin community. This will pave the way to the creation of an exhaustive database on demographic - socio – economic – cultural – health characteristics of Tamil Brahmins. Only through the analysis of such data will Tamil Brahmins be able to truly understand their current status and steer themselves into the future successfully. The community should not allow itself to fade away.

References