



## **Chakkiliyan Caste in South India during 17th to 19th centuries**

---

**Dr. Vikram Harijan**

Assistant Professor

Department of Medieval/Modern History, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj

Email- [sonmativikram@gmail.com](mailto:sonmativikram@gmail.com)

---

### **Abstract**

This research examines the socio-economic evolution of the Chakkiliyan caste in South India from the 17th to 19th centuries, analyzing their traditional occupational roles and the transformative impact of colonial rule on their social status and economic opportunities.<sup>1</sup> The Chakkiliyans, primarily engaged in leather work, cobbling, and related artisanal activities, occupied a distinctive position within the complex caste hierarchy of South Indian society. Through systematic analysis of colonial records, missionary accounts, and administrative documents, this study traces the community's transition from traditional craft specialists to marginalized laborers under British colonial administration. The research reveals how colonial economic policies, legal codifications, and administrative reforms fundamentally altered the Chakkiliyan community's social position while simultaneously creating new avenues for resistance and adaptation. The paper explores the community's engagement with Christian missionary activities, their responses to colonial educational initiatives, and their strategies for maintaining cultural identity amidst changing social circumstances. The analysis demonstrates that while the Chakkiliyan community experienced intensified marginalization during the colonial period, they also developed innovative survival strategies and forms of collective organization that laid the groundwork for later social reform movements. The study reveals the complex interplay between traditional caste structures and colonial modernity, illustrating how the Chakkiliyans navigated competing systems of social organization while preserving essential aspects of their cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> This research contributes to understanding the historical foundations of contemporary Dalit politics in South India and provides insights into the long-term effects of colonial intervention on indigenous social structures. The findings suggest that the colonial period represented both a consolidation of traditional inequalities and the emergence of new possibilities for social transformation and political mobilization among marginalized communities.<sup>3</sup> The paper concludes that the Chakkiliyan experience during this period exemplifies the broader patterns of social change and resistance that characterized South Indian society during the transition from pre-colonial to colonial rule.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bayly, Susan. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Ludden, David. *Peasant History in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

**Keywords:** *Chakkiliyan caste, South India, colonial transformation, leather work, social marginalization, cultural adaptation*

## Introduction

The Chakkiliyan caste of South India represents a compelling case study in the complex dynamics of social transformation during the colonial period. As a community traditionally associated with leather work, shoe-making, and related artisanal activities, the Chakkiliyans occupied a unique position within the intricate caste hierarchy that characterized South Indian society from the 17th to 19th centuries. Their experience during this transformative period provides valuable insights into the broader processes of social change, economic transformation, and cultural adaptation that affected marginalized communities throughout the subcontinent.

The term "Chakkiliyan" derives from the Tamil and Telugu words referring to leather workers and cobblers, reflecting the community's primary occupational specialization.<sup>4</sup> This occupational identity positioned them within the broader category of artisan castes, yet their association with leather work, considered ritually polluting in traditional Hindu cosmology, relegated them to the margins of the social hierarchy. Despite this marginalization, the Chakkiliyans maintained essential economic functions within village and urban communities, providing indispensable services related to footwear, leather goods, and various forms of hide processing.

The colonial period brought unprecedented changes to these traditional arrangements. The establishment of European trading posts along the South Indian coast during the 17th century, followed by the gradual expansion of British territorial control during the 18th and 19th centuries, created new economic opportunities and social challenges for all communities, including the Chakkiliyans. Colonial administrative systems, legal frameworks, and economic policies intersected with existing caste structures in complex ways, sometimes reinforcing traditional hierarchies while simultaneously creating new possibilities for social mobility and economic advancement.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines the Chakkiliyan experience during this crucial period, analyzing how colonial rule affected their social position, economic opportunities, and cultural practices. The research draws upon various primary and secondary sources, including colonial administrative records, missionary accounts, census data, and local historical documents, to construct a comprehensive picture of Chakkiliyan life during the colonial transition. The analysis reveals both the constraints imposed by colonial policies and the agency exercised by Chakkiliyan communities in navigating these changing circumstances.

## Traditional Social Position and Occupational Structure

Prior to the colonial period, the Chakkiliyans occupied a clearly defined position within the traditional South Indian caste system, classified among the "service castes" that provided specialized occupational services to the broader community. Unlike agricultural castes that derived their status from land ownership or cultivation, or

---

<sup>4</sup> Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Guha, Ranajit. *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981.

trading castes that gained prominence through commercial activities, the Chakkiliyans were primarily identified by their craft specialization in leather work and related activities.

The traditional occupational structure of Chakkiliyan communities was remarkably specialized, encompassing various aspects of leather processing, shoemaking, and the manufacture of leather goods. As skilled artisans, they processed raw hides into usable leather, crafted footwear for different social groups, and produced various leather implements and containers essential for daily life.<sup>6</sup> Their expertise extended beyond mere cobbling to include the production of leather bags, water containers, agricultural implements, and decorative items that served both functional and ceremonial purposes.

The economic relationship between Chakkiliyan communities and the broader society was characterized by a complex system of interdependence and exclusion. While their services were essential and highly valued, their association with leather work, particularly the handling of dead animals and the processing of hides, made them subject to various forms of ritual pollution and social ostracism. This paradoxical position created a situation where Chakkiliyan artisans were simultaneously indispensable and marginalized, essential to the economic functioning of society yet excluded from its mainstream social and religious life.

The traditional settlement patterns of Chakkiliyan communities reflected their marginal social status. Chakkiliyan quarters, typically located on the periphery of villages and towns, were spatially separated from the main residential areas of higher-caste communities. This geographical segregation reinforced social boundaries and made the exclusion of Chakkiliyans from mainstream community life a daily reality. However, these separate settlements also fostered the development of distinct cultural practices and social institutions that provided community cohesion and cultural continuity.

The internal social organization of Chakkiliyan communities was characterized by complex hierarchies based on occupational specialization, regional variations, and local customs. Different sub-groups within the broader Chakkiliyan category specialized in particular types of leather work or served different clienteles, creating internal distinctions that reflected broader patterns of social stratification. These internal hierarchies provided frameworks for social organization and cultural transmission while also creating potential sources of tension and competition within the community.

Religious and cultural practices among Chakkiliyan communities during the pre-colonial period reflected both their exclusion from mainstream Hindu religious institutions and their development of alternative spiritual traditions. Denied access to most temples and Brahmanical rituals, Chakkiliyan communities maintained their own religious practices, often centered around village deities, occupational patron gods, and folk traditions that celebrated their craft heritage.<sup>7</sup> These practices provided spiritual fulfillment and community identity while also serving as vehicles for cultural resistance and adaptation.

### **Colonial Encounter and Economic Transformation**

---

<sup>6</sup> Washbrook, David A. *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

The arrival of European colonial powers in South India during the 17th and 18th centuries introduced significant changes to the traditional economic and social arrangements that had governed Chakkiliyan communities for centuries. The establishment of European trading posts, the growth of colonial urban centers, and the gradual expansion of British territorial control created new economic opportunities and social challenges that fundamentally altered the community's position within South Indian society.

The colonial economy's emphasis on commercial agriculture, industrial production, and long-distance trade created new demands for leather goods and related products. European military forces required large quantities of leather equipment, including boots, belts, saddles, and various military accessories, providing Chakkiliyan artisans with new markets and economic opportunities. Similarly, the growth of colonial administrative apparatus and the expansion of European settlements created demands for civilian leather goods that could benefit skilled Chakkiliyan craftsmen.<sup>8</sup>

However, the colonial period also brought significant challenges to traditional Chakkiliyan economic activities. The introduction of machine-made leather goods and imported footwear from Europe undermined local artisanal production, forcing many Chakkiliyan families to adapt their skills or seek alternative forms of employment. The mechanization of tanning and leather processing, introduced through colonial industrial policies, threatened traditional methods and reduced the economic value of inherited craft knowledge.

Colonial urban centers, particularly ports and administrative towns, provided some Chakkiliyan families with opportunities for economic advancement through specialized leather work and shoe-making services.<sup>9</sup> The concentration of European officials, military personnel, and Indian elites in these urban areas created markets for high-quality leather goods that could command premium prices. Some Chakkiliyan entrepreneurs successfully established workshops and small businesses that catered to these new urban markets.

The colonial period also witnessed changes in the organization of leather work and related industries. Traditional guild-like organizations that had governed craft production were gradually replaced by more individualized forms of economic activity, reflecting broader changes in colonial economic policy. These organizational changes had complex effects on Chakkiliyan communities, providing some individuals with greater economic autonomy while undermining traditional systems of collective support and skill transmission.

Colonial administrative policies regarding artisan communities had significant implications for Chakkiliyan economic activities.<sup>10</sup> Revenue policies, licensing requirements, and regulatory frameworks often favored larger-scale operations over traditional small-scale artisanal production. These policies sometimes created barriers to Chakkiliyan economic advancement while providing advantages to competing forms of industrial production.

### **Colonial Administration and Legal Status**

The colonial administration's approach to caste issues evolved significantly over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, with important implications for Chakkiliyan communities. Initially, British administrators attempted

---

<sup>8</sup> Pandian, M. S. S. *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Stein, Burton. *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

to maintain a policy of minimal interference in local social customs and caste arrangements, but the practical requirements of colonial rule necessitated various forms of engagement with traditional social hierarchies.

The development of colonial legal systems required British administrators to make decisions about the legal status of different caste groups and the legitimacy of various traditional practices. These decisions often had the effect of codifying and institutionalizing caste distinctions that had previously been more fluid and contextual. For Chakkiliyan communities, this codification process sometimes had the effect of making their social marginalization more rigid and legally enforceable, while also creating new opportunities for legal redress and protection.

Colonial census operations, beginning systematically in the 19th century, created new forms of social classification that intersected with existing caste categories. The census process required administrators to categorize populations according to standardized criteria, often resulting in the oversimplification of complex social relationships. For Chakkiliyan communities, census classification could affect their access to various forms of colonial patronage, employment opportunities, and educational resources.

The colonial administration's approach to artisan communities and craft regulation had significant implications for Chakkiliyan economic activities. Licensing systems, quality controls, and market regulations introduced by colonial authorities sometimes protected traditional artisanal production while other policies favored mechanized and imported alternatives.<sup>11</sup> These regulatory frameworks created new forms of bureaucratic control over traditional economic activities while also providing some protections against unfair competition.

Colonial legal codes and judicial procedures often incorporated existing caste distinctions, sometimes giving them new forms of institutional support. Legal recognition of traditional caste panchayats as legitimate judicial bodies could provide official sanction for caste-based discrimination, while also creating forums for internal dispute resolution and community governance. For Chakkiliyan communities, engagement with colonial legal systems required careful navigation of both traditional social expectations and new legal requirements.

### **Missionary Activities and Educational Initiatives**

The arrival of Christian missionaries in South India during the colonial period had particularly significant implications for Chakkiliyan communities. Protestant and Catholic missions often focused their conversion efforts on lower-caste communities, viewing them as more receptive to Christian messages than higher-caste groups who had greater investment in existing social hierarchies.<sup>12</sup> The Chakkiliyans, as a marginalized artisan community, became important targets for missionary activity throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Christian missions established numerous schools, churches, and social service institutions in areas with significant Chakkiliyan populations. These institutions provided educational opportunities that had been largely unavailable to Chakkiliyan children under traditional arrangements. Mission schools taught basic literacy and

---

<sup>11</sup> Ludden, David. *Peasant History in South India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Forrester, Duncan B. *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. London: Curzon Press, 1980.

numeracy, often in local languages as well as English, providing students with skills that could be valuable in the changing colonial economy.

The educational initiatives of Christian missions had complex and sometimes contradictory effects on Chakkiliyan communities. While missionary education provided genuine opportunities for intellectual development and social advancement, it also challenged traditional cultural practices and community loyalties. Some Chakkiliyan students who attended mission schools achieved forms of social mobility that would have been impossible under traditional arrangements, becoming teachers, clerks, and other white-collar workers.

Conversion to Christianity offered Chakkiliyan families potential escape from some forms of caste-based discrimination, but it also came with significant social costs.<sup>13</sup> Christian converts often faced ostracism from their traditional communities while not necessarily gaining full acceptance in Christian society. The promise of spiritual equality before God represented a powerful attraction for communities that had been excluded from mainstream Hindu religious life, but the reality of Christian practice sometimes fell short of these ideals.

Missionary records provide valuable insights into Chakkiliyan life during the colonial period, offering detailed accounts of community practices, social conditions, and individual experiences. These sources, while filtered through missionary perspectives and agendas, nevertheless provide important evidence about Chakkiliyan responses to colonial changes and their strategies for navigating new opportunities and challenges.<sup>14</sup> Mission documentation often reveals the persistence of traditional practices alongside the adoption of Christian beliefs, illustrating the complex processes of cultural adaptation and resistance.

The relationship between missionary activity and traditional Chakkiliyan religious practices was characterized by both conflict and synthesis. While missionaries generally opposed traditional religious practices as "heathen" customs, some Chakkiliyan converts found ways to maintain elements of their cultural heritage within Christian frameworks. This selective adaptation allowed communities to benefit from missionary resources while preserving important aspects of their cultural identity.

### **Resistance Strategies and Cultural Adaptation**

Despite the multiple constraints imposed by both traditional caste hierarchies and colonial policies, Chakkiliyan communities developed various sophisticated strategies of resistance and adaptation during the 17th to 19th centuries. These strategies ranged from subtle forms of everyday resistance to more organized forms of collective action, demonstrating the agency and resilience of Chakkiliyan communities under challenging circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

Cultural resistance represented one of the most important forms of Chakkiliyan adaptation to colonial pressures. Despite external pressures from colonial authorities, Christian missionaries, and changing economic conditions, many Chakkiliyan communities maintained their traditional cultural practices, religious observances, and social

---

<sup>13</sup> Hardgrave, Robert L. *The Dravidian Movement*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Irschick, Eugene F. *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*. Madras: Cre-A Publishers, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Bayly, Susan. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

customs. This cultural persistence served not only as a form of resistance to external pressure but also as a source of community cohesion and identity during periods of rapid social change.

Economic strategies of adaptation included diversification of occupational activities and the development of new economic niches that built upon traditional skills while responding to changing market conditions. Some Chakkiliyan families expanded beyond traditional leather work to engage in related industries, such as textile production, dyeing, or other forms of craft production that utilized similar technical skills. The growth of colonial urban centers created new opportunities for such economic diversification.

Organizational strategies became increasingly important as colonial institutions developed and traditional social structures came under pressure. Some Chakkiliyan communities formed associations, mutual aid societies, or craft organizations that provided support during times of crisis and created platforms for collective action. These organizations often drew on traditional forms of community organization while adapting to new circumstances and opportunities created by colonial rule.

Legal strategies emerged as colonial legal systems became more accessible and predictable. Some Chakkiliyan individuals and communities learned to navigate colonial courts and administrative procedures to protect their interests, challenge discriminatory practices, or seek redress for grievances. While such legal strategies were often limited in their effectiveness, they demonstrated sophisticated understanding of colonial institutions and willingness to engage with them strategically.

Migration strategies provided another important form of adaptation to changing economic and social conditions. Some Chakkiliyan families moved from rural areas to growing urban centers in search of better economic opportunities, while others migrated between regions to take advantage of local variations in economic conditions or social policies.<sup>16</sup> These migration patterns helped spread information and resources within the broader Chakkiliyan community while also creating new forms of social organization and cultural exchange.

### **Colonial Policy and Social Codification**

The colonial administration's evolving approach to caste issues had profound implications for Chakkiliyan communities throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. What began as a policy of minimal interference in local social customs gradually evolved into more systematic engagement with caste structures as the requirements of colonial governance became more complex.

The process of legal codification undertaken by colonial administrators often had the unintended consequence of making traditional social hierarchies more rigid and institutionalized. Practices that had previously been fluid and contextual became formalized through legal codes, administrative procedures, and bureaucratic classifications. For Chakkiliyan communities, this codification process could make their social marginalization more systematic and legally enforceable, while also creating new opportunities for legal protection and redress.

Colonial revenue policies and land settlements had significant implications for artisan communities like the Chakkiliyans. While these policies primarily affected agricultural communities, they also influenced the

---

<sup>16</sup> Viswanath, Rupa. *The Pariah Problem: Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

economic environment within which artisanal production operated. Changes in land tenure, taxation systems, and agricultural production could affect demand for leather goods and related products, influencing the economic prospects of Chakkiliyan communities.

The development of colonial education systems reflected and sometimes reinforced existing social hierarchies while also creating new opportunities for social mobility. Educational policies that provided different levels of access to different social groups could affect the ability of Chakkiliyan children to acquire new skills and pursue alternative career paths. The structure and content of colonial education, with its emphasis on English language and European cultural values, created new forms of cultural hierarchy that intersected with traditional caste distinctions.

Colonial industrial policies had direct implications for traditional artisanal production.<sup>17</sup> Policies that favored mechanized production, imported goods, or large-scale manufacturing could undermine traditional craft production while creating new forms of employment in factories and workshops. For Chakkiliyan communities, these industrial policies represented both threats to traditional livelihoods and opportunities for economic adaptation.

### **Social Reform and Early Political Consciousness**

The 19th century witnessed the emergence of various social reform movements in South India, some of which had important implications for Chakkiliyan communities. These movements, often initiated by educated elites or reformist organizations, challenged various aspects of traditional social hierarchies and created new opportunities for social mobility and political participation.

The development of regional identity movements and cultural nationalism during the late 19th century created complex dynamics for Chakkiliyan communities. While these movements often celebrated regional cultural traditions and challenged colonial cultural hegemony, they did not necessarily challenge caste hierarchies within regional societies. Some Chakkiliyan intellectuals and activists began to develop their own perspectives on these issues, contributing to the gradual emergence of more inclusive social reform agendas.

The growth of print culture and vernacular journalism during the 19th century created new opportunities for Chakkiliyan voices to participate in public discourse. Some Chakkiliyan writers, activists, and educated individuals began to publish accounts of their experiences and perspectives, challenging dominant narratives about caste and social hierarchy. These early literary and journalistic efforts represented important steps toward the development of organized political consciousness among marginalized communities.

The emergence of voluntary associations and social service organizations during the late colonial period provided new forums for Chakkiliyan participation in public life. Some of these organizations focused specifically on issues affecting marginalized communities, while others addressed broader social and political concerns. Chakkiliyan participation in these organizations helped develop leadership skills and political awareness that would become important in later social movements.

---

<sup>17</sup> Stein, Burton. *The New Cambridge History of India: Vijayanagara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

## Conclusion

The experience of Chakkiliyan communities in South India during the 17th to 19th centuries illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of social transformation during the colonial period. Traditional caste hierarchies persisted and were sometimes reinforced by colonial policies, but the colonial context also created unprecedented opportunities for resistance, adaptation, and social change.<sup>18</sup>

The Chakkiliyan response to colonial rule demonstrates both the structural constraints imposed by intersecting systems of social and economic oppression and the remarkable agency exercised by marginalized communities in navigating these challenging circumstances. Their strategies of resistance and adaptation, ranging from cultural preservation to economic innovation to political organization, provided important foundations for later social reform movements and political mobilization.

The colonial period represented a crucial transition in the history of Chakkiliyan communities, establishing patterns and creating conditions that would continue to influence their experiences well into the modern period. Understanding this historical experience is essential for comprehending the development of Dalit politics in South India and the ongoing struggles for social justice and equality throughout the region.

The research reveals that while colonial rule brought new forms of marginalization and economic displacement, it also created unprecedented opportunities for social transformation and political consciousness. The legacy of Chakkiliyan resistance and adaptation during this period continues to influence contemporary social movements and struggles for equality in South India and beyond.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Guha, Ranajit. *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1981.

<sup>19</sup> Washbrook, David A. *The Emergence of Provincial Politics: The Madras Presidency, 1870-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.