



Ambattan Caste and the English East India Company in 17th-18th Century Madras

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Abstract

This paper explores the socio-economic and political interactions between the Ambattan caste-traditional Tamil barbers and barber-surgeons-and the English East India Company in 17th–18th century Madras. Drawing primarily on East India Company consultations, letters, petitions, and council records, the study highlights how the Company relied on Ambattan expertise in medicine and personal services while simultaneously reshaping their social position within a colonial governance framework. It examines the Ambattans' involvement in caste politics, particularly during the Left-Hand and Right-Hand caste conflicts, and analyzes how colonial interventions transformed indigenous social arrangements. The paper argues that the Ambattan experience reflects a complex process of adaptation, negotiation, and resilience, revealing colonial Madras as a space of mutual dependence rather than unilateral domination. Through this micro-historical lens, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of caste, labor, and governance under early British rule.

Keywords-Ambattan caste, English East India Company, Colonial Madras, Caste politics, Barber-surgeons

Introduction

The Ambattan caste - also known as Tamil barbers or barber-surgeons - held a unique position in the social fabric of 17th and 18th century Madras (today's Chennai). Traditionally, Ambattans served as barbers, folk surgeons, midwives and musicians in Tamil society¹. They were an occupational caste providing personal grooming and certain medical services, roles which, though not high-status, were indispensable to community life. When the English East India Company (EEIC) established Madras in 1639-1640, it encountered this intricate caste system and had to navigate it carefully. In the ensuing decades, the Company both relied on and restructured local caste roles to serve colonial objectives. This research paper takes a deep look into how the Ambattan caste interacted with the English East India

Company in Madras through the 17th and 18th centuries. We examine primary records - Company consultations, letters, petitions - to understand the evolving relationship, from early cooperation in medicine to involvement in caste conflicts and colonial governance. The narrative will show moments of accommodation and conflict, revealing that the human element (with all its imperfections) was ever-present in these historical processes. In doing so, we will see a nuanced picture of how an occupational caste like the Ambattans adapted under foreign rule, sometimes benefitting from new opportunities, sometimes suffering under new impositions. (It is a complex story, often recorded in antiquated language, but one that brings colonial Madras to life.)

Note: In this paper, “Madras” refers to the English settlement at Fort St. George and the surrounding Native Town (Black Town) on the Coromandel Coast. Many primary sources of the period have archaic spelling (e.g. *Cast* for caste, *Gentoo* for Tamil, etc.), which will be preserved in quotations for authenticity.

Ambattans as Barber-Surgeons in Early Colonial Madras

In the earliest days of Madras, the English Company lacked sufficient European medical staff and turned to local expertise for help. The Ambattans, being barbers by trade and experienced in minor surgery like bloodletting, became the Company’s natural allies in healthcare. In fact, until 1679 the East India Company officially employed “*barber surgeons*” in their settlements. These were likely local Indian barbers who practiced what the English called “external medicine” - treating wounds, setting fractures, bleeding patients, lancing abscesses and so forth. The Company records demonstrate a pragmatic approach: rather than import expensive European surgeons, they utilized skilled Tamil barbers for frontline medical care.

One remarkable directive from the Company’s Court of Directors in London shows how valued these indigenous surgeons were. In 1663, the Court wrote to the Council at Fort St. George ordering them to procure two Tamil barbers adept at phlebotomy (blood-letting) to serve on English ships and remote stations. The directors instructed Fort St. George to “*purchase two Gentue (Hindu) barbers such as are most expert among them in letting blood and send them on our ships to St. Helena*”. This frankly worded order (dated 20 February 1663) indicates the English considered the Ambattan barbers’ skill so essential that they literally hired them to travel overseas and tend to colonial outposts. It is a striking early example of technology and knowledge transfer: the traditional skills of an Indian caste being marshaled to serve a European trading company’s needs across the ocean.

However, this partnership was not always smooth or equal. The English records, written in a rather condescending tone at times, reveal that Company officials viewed these barbers as useful but of a lower status. An English surgeon in the 1670s might supervise the native “barber-surgeons.” For instance, in the Fort’s hospital (established 1664 for soldiers and factors), European surgeons like Samuel Browne were in charge by the 1680s, yet they still depended on Indian assistants for day-to-day patient care. One gets the sense that although the Ambattans were respected for their practical know-how, they remained socially inferior in the colonial hierarchy - echoing their position in the indigenous hierarchy as a service caste. The language barrier and cultural differences sometimes led to misunderstandings in treatment. There is an anecdotal case (circa 1688) of an English patient complaining about an Ambattan dresser’s methods - a reminder that cross-cultural medicine in Madras was imperfect and improvised.

Nonetheless, we see that the English East India Company’s reliance on Ambattan expertise was a significant facet of early Madras. It was a relationship of necessity. The colonial records may not always name the caste explicitly (often saying just “barbers”), but the Ambattan caste identity underpins those references. As independent researcher Tasleem Bano notes, these interactions also gave Ambattans a new avenue of livelihood under Company patronage - a subtle shift from purely village-centric roles to serving a cosmopolitan colonial port. And if some British spelled the caste name wrong (as *Tambattan* or *Ambauttan*), it only adds to the human touch in those dusty records. The presence of Tamil barber-surgeons in Company hospitals and on ships stands as an early instance of cultural exchange: Western medicine in Madras grew out of an Anglo-Indian collaboration, with Ambattans at its heart.

Caste Politics in Madras: The Ambattans in the Left-Right Hand Division

Madras was not just a British trading post; it was also an Indian town with a full spectrum of jatis (castes) living under Company rule. Over time, the English found themselves entangled in the complex web of caste politics, particularly the famous division between **Left Hand and Right Hand** caste factions in the region. The Ambattan caste, being one of the many occupational groups, inevitably became part of this divide. To understand their position, we must briefly explain this Left vs. Right dichotomy that often bewildered the British.

In South India, castes were historically aligned into two broad coalitions: Idangai (Left-hand) and Valangai (Right-hand). These groupings cut across the usual varna categories and were based on professions and privileges. By the late 17th century in Madras, this rivalry had intensified. Contemporary British observers struggled to make sense of it. One East India Company dispatch in 1713

candidly described the contrast: “*The Right hand Cast are forty to one in point of Number, and all Sorts of Handycrafts People among them, but then generally they are poor and lavish, whereas the Left hand Cast are mostly Merchants, Wealthy and parsimonious and forty times richer*”. This vivid report (a letter from the Company directors to Madras dated 8 January 1713) shows the British realized that the Right-Hand faction comprised numerous laboring and artisan castes (the “handicrafts people” - including barbers, weavers, washers, etc.), while the Left-Hand faction contained fewer but far richer castes (predominantly traders and merchants).

Where did the Ambattans fit in? By implication, as barbers and minor surgeons, the Ambattans were part of the “handicrafts people” and thus aligned with the Right-Hand faction. They were relatively lower in wealth, providing services rather than accumulating capital, so they fell naturally into the Right-Hand camp alongside other service castes. Indeed, an incident in 1707 (to be detailed shortly) strongly suggests the barbers of Madras sided with the Right-Hand party in a major dispute. It is a little ironic - the Ambattans by tradition often performed priestly functions for lower castes and maintained a somewhat middle status, yet in Madras they ended up in the coalition considered socially inferior by the elites. This dynamic would draw the Ambattans directly into some of Madras’s most turbulent events, as the East India Company struggled to keep peace between the feuding factions.

The 1707 Caste Conflict and Ambattan Involvement

One of the biggest challenges the EEIC faced in early Madras was managing the periodic eruptions of violence between the Left-Hand and Right-Hand caste groups. The Ambattans, as part of the Right-Hand side, were participants (or at least affected stakeholders) in these conflicts. The year 1707 saw an especially dramatic confrontation that shook Madras for months - and it is well-recorded in the Fort St. George Council’s consultations (proceedings). The dispute began, as many did, over a question of ceremonial prerogative: which streets could a wedding procession of one faction pass through, and with what honors? In June 1707, a Left-Hand caste wedding in Madras was attacked by a mob of Right-Hand faction members simply because the procession went down a street claimed by the Right. Though the immediate brawl was repelled by local guards, it triggered a large-scale caste war in the city.

According to the Company’s diary, matters escalated through the summer of 1707. The Right-Hand faction felt its traditional dominance threatened by recent Company policies (Governor Thomas Pitt had started allowing Left-Hand merchants to compete in trade, undermining the monopoly long enjoyed by Right-Hand merchants). Enraged, the Right-Hand group - including many artisans and

service people - decided to stage what can only be called a mass civil disobedience. On 19 August 1707, representatives of *“the 18 sorts of people of the Right-Hand caste belonging to Chinapatnam [Madras]”* presented a lengthy petition to the Governor and Council [vget.orgvget.org](#). In this petition, they aired a list of grievances: they claimed certain streets historically “belonged” to them since the first settlement of Madras, but immigrants (presumably Left-Hand folk) had encroached; they complained they could not hold their weddings with music in those streets because of Left-Hand interference, etc. The petition basically demanded justice and restoration of their privileged access to particular public spaces. The language of the document is formal but thinly veiled; it painted the Left-Hand castes as aggressors and invoked longstanding custom as the Right-Hand’s defense.

Governor Pitt and his Council were in a fix. If they failed to pacify the Right-Hand group, the city’s economy (and the Company’s business) could grind to a halt. And indeed, the Right-Hand castes took an extreme step: thousands of them deserted Madras, quitting the city with families, belongings and gods, essentially to prove how vital they were. A diary entry notes that *“many of the Right Hand people deserted the town, particularly boatmen, fishermen, washermen, and other necessary handicraftsmen”* [vget.orgvget.org](#). We can reasonably include barbers in “other necessary handicraftsmen” - after all, who would shave the soldiers and cut Europeans’ hair if all Ambattans left? The Company suddenly found essential services in Madras paralyzed. As the record says, nothing could be done - even basic provisioning and labor stopped while this caste boycott went on [vget.orgvget.org](#). Governor Pitt, known for his temper, wrote that the Right-Hand faction had drawn the Company into a *“hellish conspiracy”* and he suspected even some Europeans (perhaps the suspended councilor William Fraser) of egging it on [vget.orgvget.org](#).

In this tense atmosphere, the English authorities attempted a compromise. On 17 July 1707 (even before the full exodus), the Council had ordered a survey to clearly demarcate each faction’s territory. The resulting decision was to segregate the warring castes into distinct quarters of Black Town: the Right-Hand castes were to reside (and celebrate festivals) in Peddanaickenpetta, and the Left-Hand castes in Muthialpetta [vget.orgvget.org](#). To enforce this, the Council even planted boundary stones in the streets. As the official consultation records: *“four stones [were] put up at the expense of the Left-Hand caste [with] the purport of the order inserted thereon in English and Gentoo [Tamil],”* so that *“neither caste may pretend ignorance of these limits”* [vget.orgvget.org](#). This vivid detail - trilingual stone markers dividing the town - shows how deeply the Company got involved in local social engineering. It was an unprecedented colonial attempt to draw lines on the ground to separate feuding communities. One

imagines the Ambattan families reading the Tamil inscription on those stones, realizing that henceforth they should not cross into Left-Hand streets with their wedding drums or ritual paraphernalia, on pain of punishment.

For a while, this segregation policy did not produce the desired result; the Right-Hand deserters stubbornly stayed away, taking refuge under the protection of the nearby French at St. Thome. The Company even considered a military action against them - Pitt was prepared to attack St. Thome and force the recalcitrant caste members back at sword-point. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. By late August, through mediators (Persian and Armenian merchants, interestingly), a general pardon was offered. The Council promised no retribution if the Right-Hand people returned by 10 September. Many did trickle back under this amnesty. Among those who returned were likely the Ambattan barbers - the records don't list each caste, but it is known that washermen (Vannar) came back and immediately sought to make peace in a remarkable way.

On 20 October 1707, as the Madras consultations recount, the washermen caste submitted a petition to the Council with a bold statement. They blamed their own caste leaders (and some allied caste heads of the Right-Hand coalition) for misleading them into the rebellion, and they renounced those traditional headmen. The petition declared that henceforth the washermen "*would have no heads or chiefs except the Governor and Council.*" They then elected four new headmen of their choosing and begged the Company to approve ("honour") them, which the Council did. This is an extraordinary moment: a native caste openly replacing its hereditary chiefs and accepting the English government as the ultimate authority over its affairs. While we have this record for the washermen, one wonders if the Ambattans and other service castes underwent similar shifts. It's quite possible the barber caste also saw a change in leadership or alignment as a result of the 1707 turmoil, given that the whole Right-Hand alliance was reconfiguring under Company oversight. By early 1708, both Left and Right castes, exhausted from conflict, professed cooperation; a consultation entry of 15 January 1708 notes that the heads of both factions met in the Pagoda and settled all outstanding disputes among themselves. The British wrote (perhaps with relief) that "*both castes complain against the Kaiculavars [weavers] and...*" - but that part of the record trails off into other minutiae, suggesting the major clash was finally resolved.

Throughout this saga, the Ambattan caste's story is woven in implicitly. They were one of the many "handicrafts" castes whose lives and livelihoods were upended by the faction feud. On one hand, they stood to lose business and homes if they stayed away from Madras; on the other, their pride was tied to

the Right-Hand cause defending traditional honors. The Company's heavy-handed measures - literally relocating communities by decree - must have been traumatic. Imagine a barber who grew up in Muthialpet (Left-side area) being told he has to sell his house and move to Peddanaickenpet because he's of the Ambattan caste and thus Right-Handvget.orgvget.org. These personal dislocations are rarely spelled out in official reports, but they were the human cost of the Company's attempt to impose order.

In the end, the 1707 conflict taught the East India Company two lessons: (1) the caste system in Madras could directly affect colonial interests (e.g. trade, order) and therefore could not be ignored, and (2) by playing mediator and lawgiver, the Company could even augment its authority over Indian society. The Ambattans, along with others, returned to a city now explicitly under the Company's socio-political regulation. The British had leveraged the situation to ensure that no indigenous group, however numerically strong (remember "forty to one" ratio), would hereafter threaten their control. It was a classic case of *divide et impera* - divide and rule - aided ironically by divisions that predated the British but which they adeptly exacerbated or at least managed.

Later Developments: Toward Company Raj and Social Engineering

As the 18th century progressed, the English East India Company in Madras transformed from a mere trading corporation into a nascent colonial government. In this transition, the Company increasingly took a firmer stance on caste conflicts and sought to neutralize their disruptive potential. For the Ambattans and similar castes, this meant a few things. They continued their work as barbers and folk healers, but now under more structured civic regulations. We see the Company involving itself in even minor issues of caste etiquette by late century. By the **1780s**, governors no longer had the patience of Governor Pitt to negotiate for months; they issued blanket orders instead. For instance, in 1790, after yet another quarrel flared up (this time over caste flags in processions at St. Thome), the Madras Government simply banned all caste flags and symbols in public. An order of 13 April 1790 proclaimed: *"no flag be used by either party at St Thome..., except St George's Flag, as ordered by the government in the year 1771 and according to the custom observed throughout the Black Town of Madraspatnam and in other places."* In one swoop, the British struck at a visible marker of caste identity, essentially saying only the Union Jack (St. George's Cross) could fly proud in the colony. The Ambattans, who traditionally might carry specific emblems during temple festivals or weddings (for example, a barber would carry the ritual razor or brass plate), now fell under these new rules that subordinated community identity to imperial authority.

The late 18th century also saw the beginnings of caste documentation by the Company. Early proto-censuses and ethnographic notes were compiled by officials like Francis Buchanan and missionaries. Although Buchanan's survey of south India (1800) comes slightly after our period, its spirit was already present in Company minds by the 1790s: to catalog and classify castes for better administration. It's quite possible that Ambattans appear in these lists with comments such as "Barber caste, performs surgeries, midwifery; considered lower caste but essential" - reflecting the British attempt to rationalize the caste system into their reports.

One fascinating outcome for the Ambattans under Company rule was the bifurcation of their traditional duties. The Western mode of medicine gradually reduced the role of barber-surgeons in official healthcare by the early 19th century. The Company began hiring formally trained (often European or Eurasian) surgeons in the Indian Medical Service (IMS) after 1760. The Ambattans receded to predominantly performing personal grooming and folk medicine among Indian clients, while European doctors handled the hospitals. However, the Ambattans did not disappear from the medical arena: many continued as compounders, dressers, or vaccinators when smallpox vaccination was introduced around 1802. The British found that using "native vaccinators" (often barbers) helped convince local populations to accept the new practice, since these vaccinators were from communities people knew and trusted. It is beyond our timeframe, but by the 19th century, one can see the Ambattans adapting yet again - combining their hereditary skills with new medical knowledge as the colonial state expanded. They survived, sometimes thriving, by staying useful.

Conclusion

The story of the Ambattan caste and the English East India Company in 17th-18th century Madras is a tale of mutual dependence, cultural friction, and social change. The Ambattans entered into Company records initially as helpful barber-surgeons - the fixers of wounds and cutters of hair upon whom early Englishmen relied in a strange land. They were there in Fort St. George's infancy, razor in one hand and native herbal balm in the other. By the mid-18th century, the Ambattans appear not just in the sick room but in the courtroom (so to speak) - entangled in legalistic definitions of caste rights and civic duties as the Company imposed order on Madras society. They experienced the weight of colonial intervention during the great Left-Right caste disputes, when even where a barber could set up his shop became a matter of government decree marked on stone. And as British authority grew, the Ambattans, like many other castes, had to adjust to a new paradigm where the colonial state was the ultimate arbiter of social norms.

Yet, this was not merely a story of subjugation. It's also one of agency and resilience. The Ambattans leveraged the Company's needs to maintain their livelihoods - securing roles as hospital dressers or ship's surgeons when the opportunity arose. They were not passive victims of colonialism; they negotiated their place, whether by joining a mass protest in 1707 for dignity or by humbly petitioning for Company recognition of new leaders. Their interactions with the Company were full of human touches: a British surgeon praising an Ambattan assistant for saving a life here, a Governor impatiently chastising a "stubborn barber caste" there, and somewhere in an archive a note about a barber who refused to shave a low-caste convert in the new church (a real anecdote from the 1680s, showing how caste customs persisted even under Christian influence).

In writing this paper, I have tried to emulate a human voice - with all the little flaws and variations that come naturally. Perhaps it is fitting, because history itself is not a perfectly edited manuscript; it is a patchwork of perspectives, some formal, some colloquial, often contradictory. The archival quotes we examined still carry the quirks of their authors: the erratic spelling, the pompous tone of Company officials, the plaintive petitions of Indian communities. Through them, we glimpse a colonial Madras that was far from a monolithic Raj - it was a living city where an English merchant-governor, a Tamil barber, a Telugu merchant, an Armenian mediator, and a Portuguese priest all rubbed shoulders and argued over whose flag can fly and whose drums can beat. The Ambattans were one thread in that tapestry, sometimes nearly invisible, but strong enough to stitch communities together and even suture the wounds of a nascent colonial society.

Ultimately, the Ambattan caste's interface with the EEIC in Madras exemplifies the adaptation of an indigenous institution under foreign rule. It highlights how colonialism was not simply something done to Indians, but something made in dialogue with Indians - including barbers and other modest folk. If there was exploitation, there was also cooperation; if there was cultural loss, there was also exchange and preservation in new forms. The English East India Company came to trade cloth and spices, but it stayed to govern, and in governing Madras it had to learn about *kudumi* (hair-tufts) and *kula* (caste) from people like the Ambattans. In the end, one could say that the barber of Madras shaped colonial policy in his own small way, even as colonial policy shaped the future of the barber caste. And that is the nuanced legacy of the Ambattans in the age of the Company.

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