

## Research Paper

**DALITS - PIT TO PALACE****T.SAMRAJ**Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History,  
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*If there has been a shameful blot in the pattern of India's social structure, it has been the segregation of a large portion of the population described variously as untouchables, dalits, etc. The caste system that existed in India divided the people on the basis of their profession viz., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisiyas, Sudras and Panchamas. The Brahmin had their profession as priests and they were placed on the top of the social ladder. They had enormous powers and privileges. Next comes the Kshatriyas who were the real Valliant people, served as the protector of the nation viz., soldiers and rulers. They also occupied a superior position in the society. The Vaisiyas are the trading community who were placed on the third level of the social ladder. Last position was occupied by the Sudras,*

Yet they led a better life for some extent. Excluding them, there was a fifth group of people in the society, who form the major population, called as panchamas, but had a miserable past, had harsh treatments from the high caste people, and lived like serfs or slaves in the outskirts of the city, who were the original inhabitants. They were treated as untouchables by the high caste. This caste was defined as closed social structure based on hereditary, prestige, occupation, place and their interpersonal relationship. Romans had their slaves, Spartans had their helots, British had their villains Americans had their Negros and Germans had jews, who were considered lowly. But it should be noticed that the existence of caste system in India is

Dravidas owe their miserable condition to their socio, religious rules operation against them through ages. Because of the lower position in the society the high caste treated the low caste as wretched and disabled. As for as Indian society is concerned the darkest aspect is the social inequality, social disabilities and caste prejudices. These are inseparable in the Indian society from the remote past to the present day, which basically led to the suppression and humiliation of the weaker section of the society. The fourfold Varna system advocated by the Aryans of north India had its direct impact on the people of south India also. In fact, the people of early Tamilnadu were quite ignorant of the caste system. It is known that the early Tamil society was casteless. But it was initiated in Tamilnadu during the rule of Pallavas of kanchi and its effect is continuing. In our state Pallan, Paraiyan, Chakkillian, etc were considered as untouchables. The high caste believed and practiced that a man or a woman from the specified group touches either purposely or by accidently a high caste man or woman, which causes pollution and he/she should purify his/her body by taking bath and by performing ceremonies as per the existing custom. When a subaltern touched knowingly or unknowingly or by a chance, a Brahmin, at once he would make expiation, without telling to anybody, secretly takes bath and reads some verses from the sacred texts and changes his sacred thread or pounul. The most inhuman practice which was noticed by a Christian missionary named James Forbes in his book during 19th century is that if a Nair accidentally met a Pulaya (untouchable) on the highway, he

cuts him down with a little ceremony as he should destroy a noxious animal.

The marginalized communities were not permitted to use public roads. Since they lived in the interior parts of the villages, they were supposed to visit road side in order to meet their basic needs. But they had private paths whichever the marshy lands or jungles. They were not permitted to enter into the temples. The high caste people argued that, the temples were their own property and they worship as per sastras and agamas. The low caste people were even not allowed to touch the outer walls of the temples. The caste rigidity and the suppression of the Dalits by the high caste people formed them to find out their own gods for worship. So petty gods or deities like Amman, Issaki, Sudalaimadan, Bhadrakali etc are worshipped by them. But the social reformers, with the help of British missionaries sowed the seed for emancipation and after independence, government took stern efforts which uplifted them from pit to palace.

The charter act of 1813 may be regarded as the first legal instrument which in a limited way tried to bring the depressed classes to the level of others in the society. This act prescribed that employment opportunities should not be denied on the grounds of religion, place of birth, caste or community. It was during the British rule initially they got a better treatment. By seeing the deplorable condition, they showed sympathy towards them. But the British government in the initial stage did not make any effort to educate these people for the fear of antagonizing caste hindu. Missionaries only took up this cause of course with an ulterior motive of conversion.

The well wishers and the social reformers wanted to change the name untouchable or the Dalits or the Marginal people or the Panchamas to Adi-Dravidas. But it should be clear that the term Depressed classes should not be confused with the term Backward classes. Backward class are those who are educationally backward and to some extent economically also. But they are really high up in the social ladder. The term Adi-Dravidar means the original Dravidas or the original inhabitants of the region. Initially the word Adi-Dravidar was named for an organization as "Adi-Dravidar Mahajana Sabha" which was formed in 1892 by some leaders and well-wishers of the community in order to

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rescue the people from the harsh treatments of the high caste people. First it was proposed by M.C. Raja in 1917 and raised voice for official recognition in Madras Legislative Assembly. This was accepted by Lord Wellington and official recognition was granted. But it became popular only from the second decade of the 20th century in south India. As a part of emancipating the Adi-Dravidas from the clutches of high caste people, the British colonial government established a separate department in 1919 to look after the welfare of the Dalits. But before formation of this department, awareness was created among these people who form the 1/5th of the total population of south India by the missionaries and by some well wishers like P.V.Subramaniam Pillai, M.C. China Thambi Pillai, R. Srinivasan, M.C Madurai Pillai, etc from 19th century onwards. A very important step that was taken by the colonial government was the formation of Labour department. Its main purpose was to reach the welfare measure and benefits to the apt one. A special officer was appointed to take care of the depressed class is a great blessing to the Dalits of the Madras presidency. The welfare measure for the upliftment of the Adi-Dravidas was focused mainly after independence only. Both the central and state governments introduced various plans for the emancipation through five year plans and allocated large funds also. The government believed that by improving the socio-economic status, they can be brought to the upper strata. In 1949, the government established Harigan welfare department to uplift their socio-economic status. A minister was appointed for this department, who was assisted by an advisory committee of officials and non-officials. The director of the department will act as the secretary of the committee. He will be the both executive and administrative head of the department. In 1979, AIADMK government in Tamilnadu started a new department named Adi-Dravidar Welfare Department in order to streamline the welfare measure that are implemented by the government for their upliftment.

By realizing the effect of education, the government introduced various reforms in the field of education. Enormous facilities and schemes are provided for enriching the knowledge of Dalit children and through that they are placed in various high posts. Introduction of Labour schools, Scholarships, separate Hostel facilities, Reservation in educational institutions, providing free dress, free food, Gandhian memorial scholarship for bright students, Adhoc merit grant, financial assistance to Law graduates, free supply of text books, study materials, etc are the mile stone in improving education among dalits. It cannot be denied that the yeoman service provided by Christian missionaries for the upliftment of dalits really had an impact on their progress. They opened many schools, provided assistance in various fields and tried their level best for their welfare. Anyhow the constitutional remedies provided by the government made them to raise their head and to occupy equal status in the society.

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