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UNTOUCHABILITY AND UNTOUCHABLES IN THE PAST AND PRESENT TAMIL NADU

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Abstract:

In the words of K.R. Hanumanthan, 'Untouchability is a unique phenomenon in the Hindu Society. It is indeed an Indian Concept whose true import can be understood only in the Indian Context' The English word 'untouchability' gives local expression like 'asparsya' in Sanskrit, 'tittu' in Tamil, and 'pula' in Canarese and Malayalam. B.R.Ambedkar views, 'Untouchability is the notion of defilement, pollution and contamination'. The British Administrators coined the word, 'Untouchables' to denote the bottomline people of the Indian Society. J.H.Hutton calls them, 'Exterior Castes' since they were outside the regular cadre of castes. The British records refer them as 'Depressed Classes'. As per the Government of India Act, they are being called, 'Scheduled Castes'. The untouchables of Tamil Nadu coined the word, 'Adi-Dravida' for themselves, meaning, 'Original Dravidas'. They even started in 1857 an association called 'Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha'. M.K.Gandhi named them, 'Harijans'. Untouchability varied from caste to caste only in degree and not in kind. There was a tremendous change in the position of position from the past to present. Their leaders created much awakening since the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The Popular Governments in both Centre and Tamil Nadu State through legislative measures attempted to remove the practice of untouchability and avert attacks on the Untouchables in the name of the caste. The paper attempts to highlight the practice of untouchability and position of untouchables from the past to pre-Independence period.

KEYWORDS:

Caste, Untouchability, Depressed Classes, Adi-Dravidas, Caste-Hindus, Brahminical, temple-entry

INTRODUCTION:

Casteism in India is a Brahmanic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganga and Yamuna and transferred to other parts of the country.¹ The initial stage of untouchability might be traced back to 300 B.C.² B.R. Ambedkar duly highlights that 400 A. D. is the date of origin of permanent untouchability for only then the cow killing and beef-eating were banned by the Brahminical law and considered as a crime.³ He regarded that beef-eating was the sole cause of untouchability. During the Gupta period, the Chandalas and other low classes were regarded as untouchables. The date of Manu, the Brahminical (Hindu) Law giver was 200 A. D. as the approximate origin of permanent untouchability in Hindu society.⁴

In the age of Sangam, a sect of people announced, the coming of war by beating the drums. Those who beaten drums called Tuti or Tutiyan. The epithet pulaiya is given to the Tutiyan.⁵ The people who are

engaged in plaiting the straps of the cot, obsequies to the deceased in the funeral ground such as offering food to the departed spirits are also denoted as pulaiya. The pulaitti (women).⁶ was engaged in the occupation of washing clothes. The Paraiyas who are formed the major section of the untouchables of modern Tamil Nadu were also occupied a respectable position in the Sangam age. Their name occurs only once in Purananuru along with the other three, namely, Panan, Tutiyan, Katampam. These four classes were mainly responsible for the off-spring of later days called 'Untouchables of Tamilagam'.⁷

Tutiyas are spoken of as Illicinan and Illipirapalan meaning "degraded person" and "low-born persons" They are also called as Pulaiyas 'meaning impure persons'.⁸ The untouchability prevailed in all the parts of the Tamil Country.⁹ This stigma might prevailed by the inter-caste marriage or low profession of beating drums, and reciting hymns on the eve of funeral-rites of the dead persons. During the Post Sangam Age from 300 A. D. to 600 A. D. reveals the influence of untouchability and its bad effects on the segregation of the communities, as four-fold Varna system.¹⁰ Tolkappiyam, Cilappadikaram and Manimekalai reveals the influence of Vedic ideals of Varnashrama dharma on Tamil society.

Tevaram of Nayanmars, Tivyaprabantam of Alwars denounced the caste system and untouchability. Manikkavasagar a Saiva ..saint and author of Tevaram, Tiruvasagam, called himself as Pulaiya.¹¹ Thus, the early Saivite tradition opposes casteism among the devotees, but the society in general had developed a strong sense of caste and 'untouchability'.

In favour of the Saivite tradition, Tirumular summarizes that "there is but one caste and one God" (Onre Kulamum Oruvane Tevanum).¹² Thondaratippoti Alwar emphasized in his work. 'Tirumalai' as the true devotee of God, belongs to any community, may be regarded as casteless and all the devotees of God are equal in all the aspects.

There were stories about Nantanar a Pulaiya (drum makers) and Tirumankai Alwar a mlechha were blessed by God and revered by the followers. Therefore, it may be inferred that only by the Eight Century A. D. hereditary and permanent untouchability originated in Tamil society. The period of Imperial Cholas and Vijayanagar Kings was the heyday of Brahmanical Hinduism.¹³

Buchanan accounts of Eighteenth Century coincides with the tax system on the Totti and Talaiyari ranging from 1/2 seer to 10 seer. In the modern days, the vettiyan was called as Tottiyar.¹⁴ He maintained the concerned village in seeing or providing amenities to the people as water distribution to the various cultivators, as messenger to inform the death to the relatives, digger of graves and disposer of the dead-bodies. He also served as the scavenger of the village.¹⁵

Originally the caste system was based on the principle of division of labour. Due to this division of labour, it was essential for any family to attain perfection in their work and naturally it contributed to their prosperity.¹⁶ As a contrast to the primacy of the Brahmin in the social order, stands the segregation of the Panchama and even the food and clothing considered decent for castemen were forbidden to them.

The prejudice must have been confirmed by allotting the menial jobs, as Richard Fick mentions two types of despised castes - 'ethnic' and 'low professional'.¹⁷ The traces of casteism mainly sprang up on the code of Varnashrma which is based on profession and racial differences.

However, the division of varnas as the Brahmins and Kshatriya were considered as pure in relation to the Vaishya and Shudra. According to the analysis of Dumont the caste as pure and impure.¹⁸ The main principle of Hinduism dealt as dealt as (1) hierarchy, or ritual status; (2) mutual repulsion or ensuring their separation; (3) division of labour. This classification was viewed as a whole, founded on the necessary and hierarchical co-existence of the two opposites.¹⁹ For instance, on the sullied of the castes, such as scavenging, litting carcasses, removing hides, tanning and aiding in child birth were all called as untouchables.

Unlike the European Countries where only religious differences are found in their society, one could see the deep-rooted caste system in India. The spread of Brahminical religion in India sowed the seeds for caste system. It further proliferated and sub-castes sprang up.

The Caste-Hindus, i.e., Brahmins and the non-Brahmins such as Mudaliars, Pillais, Vellalas excluded the Untouchables as Out-castes or casteless people of the Hindu fold and considered themselves superior by birth, irrespective of their socio-economic conditions.

The Caste-Hindus made the low caste people like Pallars and Parayars as 'Slaves'. The low caste men and women were not allowed to cover the upper portion of their bodies with cloth,

they were prohibited from decorating themselves with flowers, kungumam and gold jewels. Their mode of dressing was also designated by the Caste-Hindus. The low caste men and women were not allowed to wear their sarees below their knees.²⁰ They were not allowed to walk freely in the streets. They were even prohibited from spitting on the streets. In these conditions the Government oriented welfare measures were first initiated by the British.

The petition of 1810 to the Government by the East India Company ascertains that the Depressed classes were not placed in the high rank. They asked the British Authority to place them in the equal strata

with the other Hindus. The British were not in favour of casteism.

In 1918, a memorial presented by the Dravida Maha Sangham requested the Government that the untouchables should hereafter be called of their ancient name 'Adi-Dravida' and it should be recognised by the Government instead of 'Paraya'.

A mass meeting of Adi-Dravida was held in 1920 to support C. Natesan's motion in the Madras Corporation to change the designation of Panchama to Adi-Dravida.²¹ Through his journal, Indian Review, he published the progressive opinions for social and political reforms. Natesan's motion mainly concentrated the progressive suggestions and remarks on the social status of the Scheduled Castes. Besides, he asked the State Government for the welfare measures for the Depressed classes. He published a booklet in 1911, which mentioned possible ways of elevation such as providing education, increasing the percentage of posting from the castes etc. In 1921 census, 15,025 have relinquished their old caste name of Panchama to Adi-Dravida.

The Government recognized the new name by an order issued in 1922 which directed that the term 'Adi-Dravida in Tamil Districts and Adi-Andhra in Telugu Districts should be adopted in official documents in place of the words 'Panchama' or 'Paraya' or similar names.²²

The 1931 census shows that the number of untouchables were about 15.5 per cent of the total population of the Presidency and they wished to be called as 'Depressed' ²³ since there was no unanimous concern about the change of the humiliating old caste name into Adi-Dravida.

But in the Indian caste they were still called as the Out-castes or Exterior castes or Depressed classes. Since all these terms implied inferiority on them, Gandhi called them as Harijans (Children of Lord Hari).²⁴

The Government of India Act of 1935 described them as "Scheduled Castes". The Constitution of India of 1950 also regards them as Scheduled Castes. This gave them a more dignified identity because they were now identified as the listed castes in a Schedule of the Constitution.

According to the 1941 Census, Scheduled Castes numbered 4.8 crores in India. But Scheduled Castes stood on the lowest strata of the social order. They were debarred from using public utilities, such as roads, wells, tanks, conveyance and educational institutions. They were not admitted to the temples and burning ghats. Gandhi gives a moving picture of their condition thus: "Socially, they are lepers. Economically, they are worse than slaves. Religiously, they are denied entrance to we miscall 'houses of God'. They are denied the use, on the same terms as the Caste-Hindus, of public roads, public schools, public hospitals, public wells, public parks and public wells, and the like."²⁵

In some cases their approach within a measured distance is considered as a social crime, and in some other rare enough cases their very sight itself is an offence. They have to reside in the worst quarters of cities and villages, where they availed only minimum amenities. Brahmins, though claim as the priest class of the Hindus, declined to officiate at their religious functions.²⁶

Each Province of India including Tamil Nadu was not far off this blind faith and the supreme ego of the different castes over the other caste as the Forward, Backward and the Scheduled Castes of the society. This separate identity of the class, caste and sect, preludes all the evils of the untouchability. In the beginning of the Twentieth Century, many remarkable steps were taken. Sessions and meetings were held and resolutions and acts were passed in favour of the Scheduled Castes.

For instance, the Act of 1919, enunciated to the separate and communal electorates²⁷ of the Muslims, Sikhs and the AngloIndians and Indian Christians. The seats fixed for a province were further distributed between communities and classes.

B.R. Ambedkar advocated that the separate electorate for the Depressed classes alone would assure more appointments and elevate them in social status.²⁸ He also impressed that the problem of the Depressed classes will never be solved unless they are provided with their proportionate political power in the bureaucratic set up. The Indian Franchise Committee demarks on the untouchables as the Depressed Classes or Backward and not Untouchables.²⁹

In October 1917, T.M., Nair, one of the founders of the Justice Party, addressed the 'Panchamas' at the Spur Tank meeting in Madras. He kindled their spirits of action into integral faction. He stressed that the representation of the 'Panchamas Party' and Non-Brahmin Party", could relieve the grievances of the Depressed Castes.³⁰

From the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the Madras Government introduced many schemes and assigned funds or grants to the welfare of the Depressed Classes. To devoid, the distress of the Scheduled Castes, the Labour Department was constituted under C. F. Paddison as the first Commissioner of Labour. The Labour Department grew fast in size and scope under the Rule of the Justice Party.

In accordance with the Articles 16 and 17 of the Indian Constitution, the high caste Hindus were advised to be sociable with other communities and the discrimination as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes should also be averted. If all the CasteHindus accept for the social recognition of the Scheduled Castes, then

this law will have no values.

The Harijans though they were also Hindus and worship the same Gods were not allowed to enter into the temples.³¹ They were kept far off from the temples. This was also one among the reasons for their conversion into other religions which freed them from all degradations.

Temple Entry Issue

Historically, a vital role was played by the social awakening and reforming leaders of the Madras State to fight for the temple entry of all castes. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy started this great war against the orthodox Caste-Hindus in Vaikom in Kerala which led to a series of successive demands and agitations in different parts of the Presidency under different leadership.³² Finally the Government of Madras under the Premiership of Omandur P. Ramasamy Reddiar passed the Temple Entry Authorization Act of 1947.³³ Accordingly, the Premier, Omandur P. Ramasamy Reddiar and Sivashunmugam Pillai, a Scheduled Caste leader and other Ministers of the then Government officially entered the famous Tirupati temple which was opened for the Harijans from 15th June, 1947 for worship.³⁴

The Act also emphasises that if a person obstructs any one to enter into the temple he would be punished. This Act opened a new era to the Scheduled Castes) for their religious rights.

Removal of Disabilities Act, 1947

This Act was passed in 1947 to facilitate the Scheduled Castes with their right to participate in the social gathering of other Hindus, who should be ready to treat them as equal. They were allowed to avail all the amenities. B. Parameswaran, Member of the Legislative Assembly, ascertained that the evil of untouchability has many aided impacts on the society. For the removal of untouchability, though the State Government also tried in full swing, yet the stigma was very slow to be waded out.³⁵

The then Congress Government was determined to abolish this distinction.³⁶ The Scheduled Castes were not well placed in the social pyramid and also regarded as the untouchables. The educational institutions, hostels and the working places were all infected with The disease of casteism. For healing- the - society from this age old disease Indian Constitution has taken many aided efforts in the form of constitutional safeguards and provisions.

According to Article 46 of the Constitution, "The State shall promote with special care on the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of India in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from all the social disabilities and exploitation.³⁷

Every year, the Government had propagated the evils of untouchability through different public media. The 'Harijan Day' was celebrated on 30th of every month for the purpose of making social awareness to the public for the removal of untouchability and other disabilities. Gandhi jointly worked with the Indian National Congress for the social solidarity and equality of the Depressed Classes. For their benefit, since 1919 he had pleaded in many meetings and sessions to the British Government of India. He tried to abolish the 'untouchability' much against the orthodox feelings of the majority of the Hindus. More than three decades (1916-1947) he fought against the Untouchability to promote national integrity of all and worked for the promotion of the interests of the Untouchables.

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