

Vol 2 Issue 10 April 2013

Impact Factor : 0.1870

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Golden Research
Thoughts*

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Publisher
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IMPACT FACTOR : 0.2105

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

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SOCIAL OPPRESSION: PREVALENCE AND PRACTICES OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract:

Inhuman, discriminatory, cruel and degrading treatment of oppressive people in India as well as in Tamil Nadu has been justified on the basis of caste. Caste is descent-based and hereditary in nature. It is a characteristic determined by one's birth into a particular caste, irrespective of the faith practiced by the individual. Caste denotes a traditional system of rigid social stratification into ranked groups defined by descent and occupation. Caste divisions dominate in housing, marriage, employment, and general social interaction—divisions that are reinforced through the practice and threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and physical violence. This article focuses on the practice and prevalence of untouchability in early Tamil society. This practice relegates oppressed communities or so-called untouchables, to a lifetime of discrimination, exploitation and violence, including severe forms of torture perpetrated. They were seen as the lowest rank of society, whose presence, touch and even mere reference is considered polluting to the upper castes. As such, they faced intense discrimination and abuse.

KEYWORDS:

Social Oppression, Untouchability, Untouchables, caste system, Tamil country, Pallas and Paraiyas

INTRODUCTION:

Social oppression is a concept describes a relationship between groups or categories of between groups of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed towards a subordinate group. It is kind of social forces that tend to press upon people and hold them down, to hem them in and block their pursuits of a good life.¹ R.L.Barkar says that the social oppression is a social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group or institution. Typically a government or political organisation or dominant group that is power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with the other social group. Thus the oppressed individual or group of marginalised communities is devalued and deprived of privileges by the individual or group of dominant which has more power.² Further the oppression is a form of exploitation of the people on the basis of economic, social and psychological- between social groups and classes within and beyond societies. It is a kind injustice practiced against the particular groups of people. Here injustice refers to discriminatory, dehumanizing imposed by oppressors upon dominated and exploited social groups, classes and peoples.³

Social oppression on the marginalized groups in India is a kind of denying that one social group treated another social group as unequal. The socially oppressed people in India and Tamil Nadu in particular, deprived of basic human rights and treated as social inferiors. They faced economic, social,

Title :SOCIAL OPPRESSION: PREVALENCE AND PRACTICES OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY
Source:Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063] K.MAVALI RAJAN yr:2013 vol:2 iss:10

cultural and political discrimination in the name of caste. The castes constituting the series were hierarchically graded, each caste being considered inferior to those above it and superior to those below it. The status of a man born in a particular caste was determined by the rank of that caste in the hierarchy. Once born in a caste, the status of the man was pre-determined and immutable. Thus the birth decided their status. A person's occupation was also determined for life by birth. There cannot be any inter-marriage between persons of different castes. The position and privileges in the social life of an individuals or group were also determined by caste.

Untouchability is a strange phenomenon, which has been a part and parcel of Hindu social system, based on the concept of ritual purity and pollution.⁴ According to Aiyappan the term denotes the socio-religious practice by which Hindus keep a large number of the lower castes from touching or coming near their persons, houses, temples, tanks and sometimes even public roads.⁵ The term untouchability ordinarily denotes a particular condition of a man or a woman rendering him unfit for being touched by the other persons. About the origin of untouchability Dr.B.R. Ambedkar offered several inter woven theories. One of the theory says that the untouchables were originally 'broken man', people who had been isolated from the community, through expulsions from or the extinction of the community or, in the other ways. These broken men were then allowed to live along with other communities but on the outside.⁶

It is necessary to understand the practice of untouchability. In order to understand the practice of untouchability in Indian society, it is important to understand the Varna system or caste system. The caste system, which has been dominated Indian society for over 3000 years, was developed by the Brahmanical society to maintain their superiority over the less privileged and marginalised people. According to Brahmanical tradition, society was organised into four principal Varnas, which assigned individuals a certain hierarchical status. The first literary traces of the caste system are to be found in the Rig-Veda, where three groups are mentioned: Brahma (priests), ksatra (kings or rulers) and vis (common people). The purusasukta, the tenth book of Rig-Veda however, speaks of four classes originating from the parts of the body of the creator. These classes, Brahmana, Rajanya, Vaisya and Sudra, are referred to in later literature as caturvarna.⁷ The term 'varna' does not seem to have been applied to these classes in the earliest literature, except to contrast the fair Arya with the dark Dasa. The initial distinction of people into two Varnas later developed into three (Brahma, Ksatra, and vis) and finally into four. The occupations of the first two Varnas are clearly stated to be priesthood, and administration and military duties, respectively. But the duties of the Vaisya and Sudras are not very clear. The village headman was usually a Vaisya and Sudras was servants. The post-Vedic period saw the growth and consolidation of the power of the Brahmins. The Brahmins writers continually discussed and defined the duties and rights of each caste and its place in the social hierarchy.⁸

Initially the Varna system was flexible and allowed mobility within. Later it was made rigid. It was the occupational division of the Aryans that was given the name Varnas as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas. They were given the name Savarnas or high castes. The Sudras who belonged to the fourth group of people were mostly treated as menial labourers and slaves and were considered unfit to perform the Vedic ceremonies. Since the Sudras were denied the right of wear the sacred thread or undergo upanayan⁹ ceremonies and the right to perform Vedic rituals, they came to be called Avarnas. The pre-Aryan natives of India were by and large included in the Sudra segment.¹⁰ The Sudras, who were usually labourers, peasants, artisans, and servants. They were thought to not have any special ability, any rights or privileges, and were not permitted to perform any sacrifices or homa, read or learn the Vedas or recite the mantras. They were also not allowed to enter temples and could only worship god from the outside of the temples and had to serve the upper classes as slaves, barber, blacksmith or cobblers.

Below the Sudras were the early representatives of the people who were later referred to as panchamas (meaning fifth segment), untouchables, and outcastes, depressed classes were looked on as quite outside the pale of the Varna system.¹¹ Historian Romila Thapar hold the views that the untouchables constituted the fifth major group. Their untouchability derived from their being considered polluting either because of their occupations scavengers, such as Chandalas¹² and Ugras¹³ and those who maintained the cremation grounds or because they belonged to primitive tribes such as the Nisadas¹⁴ and Ayogavas.¹⁵ They were called as an non-Aryan tribes.¹⁶ These non-Aryan people seems to be referred to as untouchables. But chief among the group was Chandalas, a term which came to be used loosely for much type of untouchables. The Chandalas was not allowed to live in the main village, but had to dwell in special quarter outside the boundaries. Their main task of their mean of livelihood was the carrying and cremation of corpses.¹⁷ According to the law books the Chandalas should eat his food from broken vessels, should be dressed in garments of the corpses he cremated and should wear only iron ornaments. The untouchables are also referred to as mleccha, a word commonly used for outer barbarians of whatever race or colour.

The mleccha had been considered as untouchables and had been physically segregated from the

mainstream of all social transaction, except being use of their labour for production. Such a system of dominance had been sanctioned by the Dharmasashtras. The Dharmasashtras had been pursued with the same degree of rigour in all the regions of the country. Oppressive caste discrimination mentioned in the Sastra literature and practice of untouchability had characterized Indian society over the ages.¹⁸

Among the Savarnas group or high castes, Brahmins were entitled to officiate the Vedic rituals, though the other two had been given the right to wear sacred thread (punul). They were alone permitted to enter into the inner shrine or garbhagriha (sanctum-sanctorum) of the temple. The Vaisyas were allowed to go up to the steps leading to the mahamandapas. The Kshatriyas were allowed up to the arthamandapa. The Sudras were permitted to go up to the prakshnavali (the courtyard around the garbhagriha). It is said that the Sudras were allowed to worship the deity from near the flag-staff and the other castes at the entrance of the Gopuram. But untouchable's castes could worship the deity from outside the Gopuram as they were not allowed to enter inside the temple. They were strictly prohibited from entering the temples.¹⁹ These people lived on the outskirts of towns and villages and they were lowlier and did unclean occupations such as scavenging, keeping the cremation grounds clean, and making leather goods. The village or town itself, generally enclosed by a wall, was divided into sectors, each occupational group living and working in a particular area.²⁰

PREVALENCE OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN EARLY TAMIL SOCIETY:

Untouchability and social segregation was practiced from early times in the Tamil country. Some of the occupations of the early Tamils treated as lower occupation. Among them of the lower section of society pottery was one. Invariably in each village there seems to have lived potters, who were known by the present name Kuyavar.²¹ The washer men who are called as Vannar also formed another class of professional workers, were treated low caste, who washed clothes of the early Tamils with a kind of soil. The Tamil classical texts of the Sangam age do employ words which are traditionally interpreted as low caste or outcaste. These words include 'pulaiyan'²² (low caste man), 'pulaitti'²³ (the feminine form of pulaiyan), 'ilicinan' (outcaste, low or uncivilized person), and 'ilipirappalan'²⁴ (person of low birth, outcaste). In these texts 'pulaiyan' is used to refer to a bard, drummer, and a funerary priest; 'pulaitti', is used to refer to a priestess, a washerwoman, and a basket maker; 'ilicinan' is used to refer to a drummer and a cot-maker and 'ilipirappalan' used to refer to a drummer. These usages seem to suggest that the above mentioned terms were considered to be outcastes in the early Tamil society.

The ideas of ritual pollution may have been prevalent in the early Tamil society as we have the references to Pulaiyan and Pulaitti. It has been observed that the term 'pulaiyan' is derived from 'pulai' which is the early Dravidian word for pollution. The references to low born people such as the ilicinan or ilipirappalan. Purananuru²⁵ refers to the person who plays the tuti (a kind drum) in a village as an ilipirappalan. It is hard to find any references to restrictions imposed upon those low groups. Even though the idea of pollution may have been prevalent, the practice of untouchability in the Sangam Age has not taken root. Though the Pulaiyan was spoken of as ilipirappalan, degraded or low born, there is no indication that he was an untouchable.²⁶

During the early period, the Pulaiyan who farmed the male members and whose women known as Pulaitti, took to other occupation like the funeral service. K.K.Pillay states that the Pulaiyas seems to have been a common name for the lowest class in Tamil society, he finds that Tudiyan, Panan, Paraiyan, and Kadamban were also generally known as 'pulaiyan'.²⁷ Tudiyan and Panan were drummers. K.K.Pillai further argues that 'it is not easy to determine the social status of the four castes in the Sangam age. Since they were spoken as Pulaiyan, they must be taken to have occupied a low position in the social gradation'.²⁸ It is clear that the advent of Aryans in the Dravidian regions these four castes had come to occupy a low social position. Certain occupation like cutting fire-wood, making burial urns and guarding burial grounds seem to have been also considered as falling to the lot of low born people. It is notable that in the age of early Sangam certain groups were of low birth had taken shape. In one place of Purananuru, the Pulaiya is described as 'ilicinan' in another place, he is spoken as ilipirappalan.²⁹

The question is frequently asked whether untouchability had appeared among the Tamils of the Sangam Age. It is difficult to give a definite answer to this question. There are no doubt references in some of the Sangam Classics to the low birth of persons of certain groups. The applications of ilipirappalan and ilicinan, applied to people of low born castes were expressive of contempt for persons of low birth. There are also references to the kadaiyar and kadaisiyar in the early Tamil literature,³⁰ who were perhaps describe as lower peasant workers. The kadaisiyar are referred to women of the lower class. From the context it appears that this reference is to women of the agricultural labouring class. But while all these reference indicate the rather contemptuous position of certain low classes of people, positive evidence regarding the

practice of untouchability were there in the Sangam Age is lacking. It seems that though the germs of untouchability came to take shape in the Pallava and the Chola epochs.

PRACTICE OF UNTOUCHABILITY:

The institution of untouchability took roots in the Tamilnadu only during the Chola period. The Pandya times witnessed the relaxation of caste system due to the influence of Vaishnavite liberalism. But the untouchability was there with the usual social disabilities. The untouchability imposed on the marginalised communities particularly on the Pallas could not be purely on the basis of untouchability in the Indian caste system. The cultivators of the soil cannot be treated as untouchables on the basis of the division of labour, as cultivation at any extent cannot be an unclean and dirty occupation. While pointing out of the heterogeneous character of the untouchability O' Malley views that the occupations of artisans, cultivators and field workers were clean and high graded.³¹ The high castes found cultivators economically useful, as they were the paddy producers, but socially did not like them. Robert Hardgrave assumes that these people suffered untouchability due to the nature of food and drink they consumed.³² M.N. Srinivas also holds the same view.³³

The idea of the belief of purity and pollution, cleanliness is considered to be a very important value in Hinduism, and the caste system enforces this idea. Untouchability was thus a means of exclusion, a social device that became religious only being drawn into the pollution purity complex. Therefore, it was believed that higher castes were more pure and less polluted, while the lower were regarded as less pure and more polluted. Due to the principle of purity-pollution several taboos and caste restrictions were introduced. The taboos were the protective principles or guidelines, which saved a high caste Hindu from the pollution by contact with low caste people. Hindu society insisted on the segregation of untouchables and could not allow them within their living quarters. They were generally required to live at the distance from the main village settlements.³⁴ Untouchables were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. They were also denied the services of barbers and dhobis.

The Tevaram,³⁵ which are mostly assignable to the epoch of the Pallavas, reveal that untouchability had clearly developed. It appeared primarily in relation to entry into temples and by time of the Imperial Cholas it became elaborately systematised,³⁶ and took roots in Tamilnadu during their period. The Pandya times witnessed the relaxation of caste system due to the influence of Vaishnavism. K.R. Hanumanthan views that about the untouchability, "during the period of Alvars and Nayanmars and most probably by the 8th century A.D. hereditary and permanent untouchability had originated on Tamil society".³⁷ In the medieval Tamil society the Pulaiyas, and untouchable community of Adanur who constituted the cheap labour force. They were living in the nearby pulaippadi (Pulaiya's settlement area). By their hard labour and through their sweat and toil, these oppressed castes produced an excess of material wealth.³⁸

Nandanar, a Pulaiya, was one among the sixty-three Nayanmars in the 12th century A.D. He suffered segregation on account of his accidental birth into an untouchable caste. He was forbidden to enter the temple to worship the Lord Siva. Instead of inviting Nandanar into the sanctum sanctorum to have communion with the Lord, only the Nandhi was ordered by Lord Sivaloganadar to move aside. Nandanar was allowed to have dharasan only a safe distance near the teradi³⁹ (the temple car-shed). Nandanar used to sing and dance in front of the Siva temples, of course standing alone and a far. Due to his ritual impurity and tabooed contact, which he could not question, Nandanar was not allowed to enter temple nor to come anywhere near the praharas. Owing to the rigour of caste and the practice of untouchability, he was forced to stand at the entrance of the temples and worship the Lord only as a purattondan.⁴⁰

In medieval Tamilnadu the Pulaiyas were considered impure mainly because they were beef-eaters and liquor consumers. The Paraiyas who handled the corpses and ate beef were treated untouchables. In general the beef-eaters of the society were considered as untouchables. The Apastamba Dharmasutra and Satapatha Brahmana vehemently condemn beef-eating, especially the flesh of cow. Those who ate beef were characterised as antyajana (last in society or lowest born) by the ancient scripture. It was clear that beef-eater were considered as untouchables.⁴¹ In Tamilnadu particularly in medieval period the Pallas, Paraiyas Chakkiliyas and Pulaiyas were considered untouchables based on the food habits. They lived in separate hamlets, outside the village. The Paraiyas lived in paraicheri. This paraicheri might have been the same as tindacheri. The Arippan⁴² and the Govis (Vedar)⁴³ belonged to the untouchables castes like to Paraiyas. The Paraiyas⁴⁴ left oppressed and disputed the legitimacy of the obligations that the high caste people demanded of them.⁴⁵ In the agrarian order of medieval Tamilnadu the untouchables were unclean (tuppuravu illai) and deserve the social disabilities such as servitude, land lessness, poverty, and lack of access to wells, temples and cremation grounds that Vellalas still try to impose on them.⁴⁶

Untouchables were segregated from the main portions of the village.⁴⁷ They entered the village or town proper only occasionally on business. During such times, they kept themselves at a distance from the high caste Hindus. The Paraiyas were not allowed to enter into the houses of the caste Hindus. When they had to do so for any special work, they might do so only through a special door made for them. While working, they should not talk with the caste Hindus and if they wanted to do so, they should hold their hands before their mouths in order to avoid contamination.⁴⁸ They were not allowed to enter in temple but they had to supply paddy, rice vegetables, milk products, etc. to the temple festivals.⁴⁹

It is stated in the Manual of the Madura District that the Pallas were the untouchable's person and they were never permitted to dwell within the limits of a village nattam. Their huts from a small detached hamlet, the pallacheiri or pallarteru (street of Pallas) removed from a considerable distance from the houses of the respectable inhabitants and barely separated from that of the Paraiyas the paraicheri.⁵⁰ The Pallas were not allowed to enter the streets of Brahmins or approach the Brahmins within several feet. They might enter the street of other non-Brahmins but not their houses. The non-Brahmins might enter the streets of Pallas but not their houses.

K.R. Hanumanthan views that originally, the Pallas were not untouchables but were occupying an honourable and respectable position in society. If that is the case, the question naturally arises, how did they become slaves and untouchables? The answer is that Marathas in the Tanjavur region and the Vijayanagar kings in the Pandya region. They were foreigners to Tamilnadu. The Pallis in the Chola region and the Kallars in the Pandya region readily gave their support to the intruders and thereby got liberal grants of land.⁵¹ The Nayaks established a sort of feudal system called Poligari System, divided the whole kingdom into 72 palayams and appointed their own men as Poligars or rulers of the palayams. The Telugu nobles got the fertile parts of the kingdom while the dry tracts Ramanathapuram, Pudukkottai, etc. were given to the Kallar and Maravar chieftains. Naturally, the Pallas who was the original owners of the land was deprived of their lands by the new system. Since the outside did not know the art of wet cultivation, they employed Pallas as their subtenants and farm labourers and suppressed them into slavery. Since they were forced to pay the major portion of their produce as tax to their overlords, many sub-tenants had to sell out their lands and became landless labourers. The palayams in order to keep them under control naturally prescribed all the rules of untouchability for them and kept them as slaves.⁵²

The untouchability imposed on the Pallas could not be purely on the basis of the division of labour, which has been forming the basis of untouchability in Indian caste system. L.S.S O' Mally states that the Paraiyas and the Chakkiliyas have been treated as untouchables as their occupation being mean and dirty. The Pallas as cultivators of the soil cannot be treated as untouchables on the basis of the division of labour, as cultivation at any extent cannot be an unclean and dirty. The Pallas as cultivators of the soil, cannot be treated as untouchables on the basis of the division of labour, as cultivation at any extent cannot be an unclean and dirty occupation".⁵³ Pallas were pushed down to menial status; they began to settle in the slums nearby the paddy fields.⁵⁴ According to an inscription of medieval times (1665 A.D), they seem to have enjoyed a number of privileges.⁵⁵ But, pallupattu describes the Pallas as poor agricultural serfs. They were serfs in the lands of individuals and temples till the end of the first half of the 19th century A.D.⁵⁶

The marginalised castes belonged to the lowest strata in Hindu hierarchy. They were not only untouchables but also were unapproachable. Unapproachability was also very severe in Tamilnadu. The low caste slave people had to keep a stipulated distance from the caste people in proportion to their stage in the social order.⁵⁷ This distances what the sociologist call the 'social distance'. The scale of distance change with the low or high status of the untouchables, as well as caste Hindus. Francis Day says that a Elva must Keep 36 paces from a Brahmin and 12 from a Nayak which a Kaniyan would pollute Nambudiri Brahmin at 24 feet.⁵⁸ Samuvel Mateer gives 36 Paces as the distance, a Shanar must keep from a Brahmin and 96 paces on the distance for a Pulaiyan.⁵⁹ From a Nair, a Pulaiyan should keep the distance of 66 paces, a Nair must not come within 3 feet of a Nambudiri Brahmin and Elava or Shanar within 24 paces and a Pulaiyan or other untouchables within 36 paces.⁶⁰ The distance of approachability for a Pallas was 16 yards whereas for Paraiyas it was 32 yards.⁶¹ The Shanar who were higher in status than the Pallas and Paraiyas could even enter the streets of the Brahmins and could stand at 12 feet from a Nayar and 36 feet from a Nambudiri Brahmin.⁶²

It is on record that an untouchable should stand at a prescribed distance and had to cover his mouth with one hand when speaking to a caste Hindus.⁶³ The approach beyond these limits would pollute the caste Hindus. The presence was polluting and the distance they had to maintain from the different high caste was fixed by a kind of arithmetical prescription. If a high caste man was polluted by the touch of a low caste man, purification was necessary. Hence, the low castes were commonly spoken of as outcastes. Barbosa says that if a Pulaiyan touched a Nayar woman, she was made an outcaste for life.⁶⁴ If a Pulaiyan touched a Brahmin, he had to take his bath and at once change his sacred thread. On the other hand if a Pulaiyan

polluted a Nayar, he had only to take bath to purify himself.⁶⁵ Thus the so called high caste people required to avoid close conduct with the oppressive people, because they considered them as unclean caste.

The oppressive castes of medieval Tamil country were treated by the higher castes as sub-humans, less than men, worse than beasts. They were prohibited from having any social intercourse with the high caste Hindus and enjoying the elementary civic rights such as participation in social and religious functions, entering temples, using the public tanks and roads and utilising the service of the priest, barber, washer man, etc.⁶⁶ Further their touch, shadow and even voices were deemed by the caste Hindus to be polluting. They also were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals ornaments, were obliged to wear a particular type of footwear and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy, and unhygienic outskirts of villages.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it may be said that untouchability did not rear its ugly head in early Tamil society at least till the end of the early Sangam age. But strong condemnation of superiority based on birth is made by most of poets of medieval periods and religious leaders such as Nayanmars and Alvars of the Pallava period, who of course accept the theory of untouchability of some castes such as Pulaiyas, Paraiyas and Panas. During the Chola period only, we find definite mention of untouchability village called tindacheri in medieval inscriptions and Tamil literatures. Under the Pandiyas and Vijayanagar rulers, a rigid caste system and untouchability took deeper roots in Tamil society.

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9. Upanayana, initiation ceremony of a boy at the tender age admitted to the student life. It is considered as second birth (twice born or dvija) in a spiritual sense. After the initiation the student lived with the teacher in his house for studies. In the end of the education, student was called Brahmacharin, which meant a 'religious student. This ceremony was only allowed to the upper three Varns and not to the Sudras.
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11. A.L.Basham, The Wonder that was India, third revised edition, London, 2004, p.145.
12. The Chandalas, class of people in ancient India generally considered being outcaste and untouchables. According to the ancient law code of Manu-Smrti, the class originating from the union of a Brahmin woman and a Sudra man.
13. Ugras also known as Uggas, have been referred to as following low occupation within the fold of Aryans. They were treated similar to Sudras.
14. Nisadas, were fishermen castes, to be formed due to the anuloma order of marriage between a Brahmin and a Sudra woman. They are referred to as hunters and fowlers in the Jatakas. The Nisadas, like the Chandalas, lived outside the village and town.
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