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NOMENCLATURE OF UNTOUCHABLES –REVISITED



J. Sadayamuthu

Introduction :

The term 'Depressed Classes' denotes the Untouchables of yesteryears of India. They were the sum total of untouchable castes sprang out of administrative exigencies. A perusal of the official records shows that this term was in currency between 1920 and 1935. In the Census Report of 1921, over six million people covering nine castes were listed as Depressed Classes. The figures given in this report could only be regarded as an approximation, because no effort had yet been made till then to define the term 'Depressed'. But in 1931 based on the stigma of Untouchability, the Depressed Classes were identified and enumerated 15.5 percent of the population of Madras Presidency was found to belong to this category.¹

Again, to denote the Depressed Class people, the terms 'Suppressed', 'Oppressed', 'Repressed' and 'Sub-merged' were also used.

Abstract :

The most despicable feature of the Indian caste system is the position accorded to the low caste Untouchables. At various occasions, they have been called by various names such as Untouchables, Unapproachables, Depressed Classes, Avarnas, Adi-Dravidas, Panchamas, Scheduled Castes, Outcastes, Exterior castes and so on. Harijan is the glorified term coined by Gandhi in 193 for calling the total body of Untouchables. But the Depressed Class leaders like B.R.Ambedkar and M.C.Rajah strongly opposed the name Harijan. Though the term 'Scheduled Castes' is the expression standardized in the 'Constitution of the Republic of India', this name was first coined by the Simon Commission. This paper exposes the circumstances for calling the Untouchables in different names and the stand of the leaders like Gandhi, B.R.Ambedkar and M.C. Rajah in the nomenclature of Untouchables

Key words : Depressed Classes, Untouchables, Harijans, Dalits, Adi-Dravidas, Paraiyas, Pallas

Short Profile

J. Sadayamuthu is working as an Assistant Professor in History at Government Arts College for Men, Nandanam Chennai, Tamil Nadu. He has Completed Ph.D.

formerly being strictly segregated and restricted to menial work.²

Dalits

Currently the Hindu word, 'Dalit' is commonly used to denote the Depressed Classes. This was first used by Swamy

The term 'unprivileged' is being used to denote the Untouchable Classes of people since the privilege that would seem to be common rights enjoyed by humanity was denied to them.

Untouchables

'Untouchable' is a name generally applied to persons in the lowest rank of Hindu society. The Webster Dictionary vividly describes the 'Untouchable' as a member of a large hereditary group in India having traditional Hindu belief and quality of defiling by contact the person, food or drink of a member of a higher castes and

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Shardhananda. But in Marathi, the term was used to denote the members of Scheduled Castes. First, the term became applicable only to members of the Mahar Community in Maharashtra but later it included all the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Neo-Buddhists, landless labourers and those economically exploited.³ In Maharashtra, the Mahar Community is an Untouchable Community. To begin with, there is no generic name of common acceptance that actually describes this group of people.

Usages of B.R. Ambedkar

In the Puranas, they were called Aspasya, Avarnas, C'handals, Antyajas, Jambavans, Varishals, Antya, Bhangi etc. The expressions Antyaja, Antywasi and Bahiya were used by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar in his book "The Untouchables", and he concluded that the Untouchables were the "Broken Men" of the Aryan society.⁴

Harijans

The Scheduled Castes were christened as 'Harijans' , by Mahatma Gandhi. In the Hindu pantheon, Hari, is the preserver of the world. Since the Untouchables were the people who were totally neglected by the bulk of the society, it was appropriate to name them as 'Harijans'. The literal meaning of the term, "Harijans" is "Children of God". For many years, Gandhi himself used the terms like 'Untouchables; 'Pandiamas', 'Antayaja" (the last born) and 'Bhangi'. The term 'Bhangi' refers to a low-caste of north India engaged in scavenging. Gandhi used it figuratively to mean all the untouchable classes. But in early 1930 Gandhi began to use the term 'Harijan ' as part of propaganda for the eradication of Untouchability.

Gandhi borrowed this term from the poem of one Narasirinha Metha, a well-known poet of Kathiawar, the native place of Gandhi. Since then, he had begun to propagate this term in his journal, 'Harijan'. He wrote, "All the religions of the world describe God pre-eminently as the

Friend of the friendless, Helper of the helpless, and Protector of the weak. The rest the world apart, in India who can be more friendless, helpless or weaker than the forty million or more Hindus of India who are classified as 'Untouchables'.⁵ Thereafter, in his writings he always used 'Harijans' as the name signifying 'Untouchables'.

The term, thereafter, became a shining bowl for his propaganda missionary. Moreover, through his weekly, Harjan and his Harijan Sevak Sangh, Gandhi did his best to popularise this term 'Harijan'. It began a political slogan for Congress and a tool in the hands of Caste-Hindus to prove their concern for the cause of Untouchables. This term, 'Harijan' served the political purpose without opposing their social hierarchy.

The term, 'Harijan' was begun to be used in records from 1930.⁶ In order to appreciate this term, the Government of India issued an order in 1947 to record the Untouchables as 'Harijans'. The order states: The Government have directed that term Harijans 'should be used to denote persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes in all public records except in proceedings under statutory enactments until the statute is amended".⁷ But during Gandhi's own life-time, the term was objected by the leaders of the Depressed Classes.

Opposition to the Term, 'Harijan'

M.C. Rajah the leader of Depressed Class raised a strong objection and said, "Harijan-Meaning Children of God" denotes all Hindus and hence it is inappropriate for the "Depressed Classes". Rajah asserted that the castes concerned could very well adopt a name for themselves and that no one else had the right to give them a name.⁸ It is to be noted that this term 'Harijan' has not found a place in the Constitution of India. Instead the term. Scheduled Castes has been incorporated in the Constitution.

During the discussion on the

amendment of the Local Boards Act in the Bombay Legislative Council, Ambedkar's group in the Council protested against the use of the term, 'Harijan' for statutory purpose. P.G.Solanki, Ambedkar's Lieutenant, told the House not to give recognition to the term and warned that they would not do so without facing the remonstrance. He said, "the word has been introduced by Mahatma Gandhi with the sole object of giving them a dignified name, but nearly 98 to 99 percent of the Scheduled Castes do not like the word".⁹

Scheduled Castes

The Government of India in 1935 listed all the hereditary Untouchable Communities in the different provinces in a 'Special – Schedule'. An order-in-council issued under the Government of India Act, 1935 called as designated names of the castes in the list as 'Scheduled Castes'. In the list concerning the Madras Presidency, eighty

six Untouchable Castes came under the category of 'Scheduled Castes'

This term 'Scheduled Castes' became the legal administrative term of the British Government and from 1935 onwards in order to provide political representation and special assistance in educational and employment matters, this term was used in the place of Untouchables. This has been incorporated in the Constitution of the Republic of India.

The Constitution gives the meanings of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Articles 366(24) and 366(25) respectively.

Article 366 (24) of Indian Constitution views "Scheduled Castes" means such castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within such castes or tribes as are deemed under "Article 341 to be Scheduled Castes for the purpose of this Constitution".

Article 366 (25) of Indian Constitution views, "Scheduled Tribes" means such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under "Article 342 to be Scheduled Tribes for the purpose of this Constitution".

Article 335 of the Constitution makes provision for the reservation of services and posts to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. It simply indicates that Untouchability has been taken as the scale to prepare such list of Scheduled Castes. And therefore, National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was appointed under Article 338.

"Article 331 of the Constitution empowers the President of India, after consulting the Governor of the concerned state, to notify an order, the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes by this onstitution he deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that state". And the second clause of the article empowers Parliament to pass a law to include in or exclude out from the list so notified by the President, "any caste, race, tribe or parts of or group within any caste, race or title".

Criteria for Scheduled Castes

There are certain basic principles on which the 'Scheduled Castes' were identified. J.H.Hutton, the Census Commissioner of India, 1931, provided a basis for listing the Scheduled . He suggested consideration of seven disabilities as criteria for Scheduled Castes. These seven disabilities were :

- (i) Scheduled Caste was not entitled to worship in Hindu temples
- (ii) Scheduled Caste was not received the services from Brahmins
- (iii) Scheduled Caste was not received the services from barbers, washermen, etc.
- (iv) Scheduled Caste was not allowed to take water from public wells
- (v) Scheduled Caste was not allowed to utilize or use the public roads, paths and the public conveniences
- (vi) Scheduled Caste was not entitled to enter into educational institutions, occupational institutions, etc.
- (vii) Scheduled Caste was not allowed to have

free social intercourses with the rest of the people.¹⁰

The above said criteria simply means that those who had been denied the very civil rights or human rights were the Untouchables or Scheduled Castes. These disabilities of Scheduled Castes were varied from region to region. And also the number of Scheduled Castes was also varied from time to time. When the government took special interest to uplift them, more and more castes demanded to include their names in the list of Scheduled Castes and so there was no end of the problem.

The word 'Depress' which means to press down and the word 'class' connotes "one group of people' Thus, in ordinary parlance the 'Depressed Classes' should mean a group of people pressed down. But it refers to the persons of lower castes or Untouchables. The term. "Depressed Classes" began to be used in official records in the early Nineteenth Century .It was due to the Government's resolution to extend educational facilities to the lower rungs of society. In the first stage, all the Untouchables, aboriginals, hill tribes, criminals and the like classes were included in the list of Depressed Classes. But in course of time, it was confined only to Untouchables, since the Tribals are not untouchables. V.R. Shinde, who formed the "Depressed Classes Mission society of India" in 1906, says, "The term "Depressed Classes" does not include the comparatively blessed human beings, hordes of whom are still defiantly standing outside the pale of Civilization in India and are partaking with beasts and birds in the romance of natural life".¹¹

In 1918, when the Southborough Committee visited India, all the leaders of Untouchable Castes presented their memorandum restricting the "Depressed Classes" to cover only the Untouchables. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his memorandum pointed out that the confusion about the expression was unreal because for all practical purposes the Untouchables and the Depressed Classes were

the same.¹²

Hence, since 1919 the term "Depressed Classes" gained statutory recognition. For the first time, the Government of India Act of 1919 provided for the political representation for the Depressed Classes, through nomination of members of this class in the Local bodies. J.T. Martin, the Census Commissioner, prepared a rough estimate of the minimum number which could be considered to form "Depressed Classes of Hindu Community".¹³ In the field of legislature also, the term became official.

During a discussion on the educational facilities of the Untouchables, M.R. Jayakar observed, "By Depressed Classes, I mean those who suffer from social disabilities like Untouchability".¹⁴ The Indian Statutory Commission also defined the term as 'Persons who cause pollution by touch or by approach within certain distance'.¹⁵

The State Government of Bombay appointed the Sarte Committee to consider the nomenclature of Untouchables. The Committee recommended "Depressed Classes" should be used in the sense of Untouchables. On this basis the Government of Bombay adopted a resolution to designate Untouchables' as the Depressed Classes.

The Sarte Committee also distinguished the Depressed Classes from the term Backward Classes. The Backward Classes are 'Shudras' and occupied a dominant position in the economic and political life of the villages. The Indian Franchise Committee demarcated the Depressed Classes and they were considered less than 'Shudras' who occupied dominant position in the economic and political life of the villages. And further the Committee said, that the Depressed Classes should not be included with the primitive and aboriginal tribes even though they were economically poor but they were not Untouchables. Both the Backward Classes and Tribes are touchables and hence superior to the Untouchable Depressed Classes. Thus, the Untouchables were labelled as

Depressed Classes in 1932 and in Constitution. It was taken to mean Untouchables of Hindu fold only. Though the 'Depressed Classes' itself was substituted by the term 'Scheduled Castes' in the Government of India Act of 1935, it retained its cream and continued to be used as a synonym of untouchables.

The list of Depressed Classes prepared by J.H. Hutton, the Census Commissioner of 1931 and the list of Scheduled Castes published by the Government in accordance with the Government of India Act of 1935 are more or less the same. The defacto Depressed Classes 1931 is the de jure of 1935.

Adi-Dravidas

Since 1900, the Depressed Classes of the Madras Presidency have been known by different names like Pancharnas, Paraiyar (Pariahs), Malas, Madigas, etc. The term, 'Adi-Dravida' was commonly used to designate the Untouchables of Tamil Nadu, but it was not used in Government records prior to 1920. The change in the nomenclature of the Depressed Classes into Adi-Dravida was done as a result of the concerted efforts taken by M.C.Rajah, a leader of the Depressed Classes.

The Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha was the earliest socio-political

association of the Depressed Classes of Tamil Nadu.. In 1857, some learned scholars, businessmen and social workers belonging to the Depressed Classes formed an association. In December 1892, this association was registered under Act XXI of 1860 as "The Madras Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha."¹⁶

This Association was started with a view to organise the Depressed Class people. The leading figures behind the formation of this Association were P.V.Subrarnanian Pillai, Mylai Chinnathambi Pillai (the father of M.C. Rajah), Pandit C.Ayyothi. Doss, M.C.Rajah, R. Veeraiyan, Rettairnalai Srinivasan, M.C. Madurai Pillai and J. Sivashanmugam Pillai.

In 1917, M.C. Rajah the leader of the Depressed Classes led a deputation consisting of P.V. Subrarnaniam Pillai, K. Munuswami Pillai, V. Rajarathinam Pillai., Venugopal Pillai, V.G. Vasudeva Pillai and Tiruppugal Ammal and presented a memorandum to E.S. Montagu and Lord Chelmsford asking for a change in the name of the Depressed Classes. The relevant portion of the memorandum reads as follows:

"The very name by which these people refer to us breathes contempt. We should therefore request the Government to help us in our efforts to attain social elevation by issuing orders that hereafter in all Government communications we should be designated as Adi-Dravidas or the original Dravidas, thus bringing us into line with the non-Brahmin Hindus who are spoken of as Dravidas".¹⁷

In 1.922, M.C. Rajah, while moving the resolution in the Madras Legislative Council for the change in the nomenclature of the Depressed Classes, made a forceful speech advancing valid arguments in support of his plea.¹⁸ He drew the attention to the real connotation of the terms "Paraiya" and "Panchama". The former meant something mean and despicable, while the latter denoted one who was an outcaste. He thundered:

"We are the original inhabitants of this land and we never submitted to the yoke of caste. We are the true descendants of the original inhabitants and preservers of the original Adi-Dravidian civilization."¹⁹

This resolution (No.225) was supported by T.Namberurnal Chetti, M.C. Madurai Pillai and K.Srinivasan Iyengar and S. Somasundaram Pillai. They pleaded for the removal of the stigma and extended support to the resolution. The resolution was carried and then Government issued an order in 1922 directing the use of the term "Adi-Dravida" in Tamil Districts and the term "Adi-Andhra" in Telugu Districts "Adi-Karnataka" in Karnataka Districts in place of names like Panchamas and Paraiyas.²⁰

An order was issued on 25th March 1922 to record in the Government documents.²¹ But however, this order was not fully enforced until 1924. In this regard, R.Veeraiyan raised a number of questions against the officials who did not comply with the Government Order. On behalf of the Government, the Rajah of Panagal, the then Chief Minister of Madras Presidency stated that the Government would not use the caste names of the Depressed Classes and that it would take any action if any one used the caste names instead of the term 'Adi-Dravida'.²²

Many of the Depressed Classes men were not even aware of the change in the name of their community. A few communities started calling themselves as "Adi-Dravidas", but many others did not. But, the term "Adi-Dravida" was known even before 1922. It was found in the Census Report of 1911 and some castes of the Depressed Classes were entered as 'Adi- Dravidas'.

In the Census Report of 1921, there found 50,015 Adi-Dravidas in Tamil Nadu apart from Paraiya and other names. In 1931 and 1951 Census Reports, there were 16,19,277 and 19,53,669 Adi Dravidas respectively. The population of Paraiyas and Pallas was also enumerated separately. This was because the officials of the Government had not taken keen interest in enumerating these castes to the list of Adi Dravidas.

Secondly, the Depressed Classes themselves were not aware of the change in their name to "Adi-Dravida". Thirdly, from the very beginning, the Pallas did not want to change their caste name from Pallas to Adi-Dravidas and they prepared the name "Devendra Kula Vellalars" instead of "Adi- Dravidas".

In 1920, G.A. Natesan tabled a motion in the Madras Corporation to change "Panchama" into "Adi-Dravida" and a mass meeting of Adi-Dravidas was held to support it.²³ From 1920 onwards, the term Adi-Dravida was used in the Madras Corporation records.

Following the footsteps of the Untouchables in Tamil Nadu, the Untouchables of

Andhra and Karnataka began to call themselves as "Adi-Andhra" and "Adi - Karnataka" respectively.

However, the change of name did not either socially or materially benefit the Depressed Classes. The Superintendent Census Operation, M.W.M, Yeatts said thus :

"There is something infinitely pathetic in the vain idea that a change of name can reverse the stigma of centuries. It is a mistake to encourage terms which obscure real social units. That so ugly and clumsy a term as Adi-Andhra should come to obliterate such real and lively distinctions as Mala and Madiga is hardly to the good communities of such numerical importance and pronounced individuality should be encouraged to retain and develop a pride in their cognomens".²⁴

To conclude, certainly the change in terminology of Untouchables found definite place in the statutory records and constitutionally they were regarded as the citizens and the constitutional rights were accorded.

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