

# Transforming Inequality: A Study of Tamil Nadu's Depressed Classes

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## Abstract

The caste system has traditionally operated in Indian society, resulting in a rigid division and displacement of certain sections of society." Among such sections of society are the "Depressed Classes, who suffered from exclusion, poverty, and lack of basic rights." This research work attempts to follow the social trajectory of such sections of society in Tamil Nadu, wherein historical imbalances caused by colonialism are followed by attempts at change through post-colonial India. The support of social reformers, committed administrators, and governments is highlighted as a means of uplifting these sections of society through better education, means of livelihood, and social status through targeted legislation and efforts at social change through education.

**Keywords:** Caste System in India, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Tamil Nadu, Social Reform and Upliftment, Welfare Policy, Colonial and Post-Colonial Policies, Social Justice and Equality.

## 1. Introduction

The caste system, which is an integral part of the Indian society, has been determining the position within the social set-up and allocation of resources. According to Varnashrama Dharma, society is classified on the basis 'of the occupations followed.' There were four varnas in society - the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and the Sudras. Later on, the Sudras, particularly those born out of unions between persons belonging to different castes, were relegated to the fringes and were termed "Panchamas" or "untouchables." They were relegated to "menial and 'polluting' tasks."

In South India, specifically in Tamil Nadu, the early social structure was centered on "kings, Brahmins, merchants, and Vellalars." The rigidity of caste divisions became more entrenched during the Vijayanagar era and was further utilized by the British colonial government. In using a "Divide and Rule" policy, the British colonial government further ensured the marginalization of the Depressed Classes.

## Social Reform and Early Upliftment Efforts

Caste system is a unique phenomenon in the Indian social system. It has taken deep roots in the Indian society to the extent that it remains ubiquitous in variations. Also, the number of sub-castes has become innumerable. Manu, the ancient law-giver offers various explanations to the caste system<sup>1</sup>.

Varnashrama Dharma explains about the four divisions of people viz., Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras<sup>2</sup>. But this division was made according to the professions that the people had taken up. By passage of time, approximately from the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onwards due to the rigidity of the caste system and attitudes of people the last division of people, the Sudras were discriminated and were pushed to the lower status in the society<sup>3</sup>. Particularly, the offsprings of the intermarriage couples were considered as low born and were termed as children of the fifth varna, the Panchamas<sup>4</sup>. Further, the lower castes were treated as untouchables, since they were doing the menial work which included jobs like skinning of animals and carcasses, butchery of animals, fishing, removal of human waste, attending to cremation work, tanning leather and making shoes<sup>5</sup>. In course of time, they were also considered as polluting people. Consequently, they were suppressed and oppressed by the high caste people. This was the general scenario in the territories north of the Vindhya and this situation continued through the ages.

In South India in general and in the Tamil country in particular, the social order had the following divisions as kings, Brahmins, Traders and Vellalars. Later arose the Left Hand and Right Hand castes during the Chola period. But caste rigidity and untouchability gradually emerged in the Tamil country from the days of the Vijayanagar rule. It was during this time that the Europeans also began their trade settlements in South India. Their rivalry for commercial supremacy in South India led to several wars and finally the English came out victoriously in their wars with rival European trading companies. In this process, they subjugated the local powers also and established their mastery over the peninsular India. The English knew very well that the alien rule would be resented by people and they would rally together to exterminate the new masters. Hence, to perpetuate their rule, the English played the "Divide and Rule" game both in the political and social spheres. In the political sphere they drove a wedge between the local chiefs, driving one against another which led to the downfall of ruling dynasties in South India. In the social sphere, the caste system was a tool in the hands of the English best used by them in inciting one against the other and the colonial period witnessed perennially communal disturbance. The upper caste Hindus during the colonial period had always harassed and illtreated the lower castes. The condition of the untouchables - the Depressed Classes was more deplorable. Their woes and sufferings were inexplicable.

However, from the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, matters began to change. Social reformers of the period with the support of the sagacious imperial administrators advocated reforms for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. As a result, the "Depressed Classes Elevation Society in South India" was inaugurated and leaders of various communities participated in its first conference and manifested their support to the Depressed Classes<sup>6</sup>. Due to the efforts of the leaders and formers the Labour Department was created in 1920 by the Government of Madras to protect the interests of the Depressed Classes. G.F. Paddison a senior member of ICS was appointed Commissioner of Labour who worked for the welfare of the Depressed Classes and was called Protector of the Depressed Classes<sup>7</sup>. In the Free India, the Department took a new shape into Harijan Welfare Department in 1949 which again was shaped into Adi-Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department in 1979.

From 1920 onwards, the Depressed Classes were progressing gradually by the administrative measures and legislations. Right from the time of the Justice Party's Government, they were encouraged by the successive Governments of the parties such as Congress, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and All

India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam during the period 1920-2001. Thus, this period witnessed the development of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu.

Almost all scholars unanimously feel that caste is a curse in Indian society. Particularly, the inhuman treatment and innuendos inflicted upon the Depressed Classes for a long time by the upper caste Hindus cannot easily be wiped out from the memories of the generations of the Depressed Classes. It is only by the words and deeds of social reformers of India like Mahatma Jyothiba Phule, Ramalinga Adigal, Vaikunda Swamigal, Mahatma Gandhi, Periyar E.V.Ramasami, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, M.C. Raja, Swami Sahajananda, Rettaimalai Srinivasan, Narayana Guru, Sankaran Nair and G.A. Natesan that the Depressed Classes were rejuvenated and encouraged to fight for their cause. They demanded equality and dignified treatment and they wanted recognition as human beings.

Under these circumstances, the Pariah Mahajana Sabha was formed in 1900 to voice their grievances. Their voice and activities were strengthened by the association of elites like V.S.Srinivasa Sastri, Yaqub Hussain, E.Brutzer, Muthu Veeraian Pandithar and O.Kandaswami Chettiar. The Press also came to their rescue and Boologavachan, Dravidan, Kudi Arasu, Justice and many other journals and newspapers focused on their miseries and made appeals to the government to extricate them from such tribulations. The Colonial authorities listened to their requests and passed orders for the implementation of socio-economic welfare measures after an examination of the condition of the Depressed Classes. By the formation of the Labour Department in 1920, the Government had taken good care of the Depressed Classes, aboriginal groups and the hill tribes who were all along the downtrodden communities<sup>8</sup>.

During the pre-Independence period, the Colonial Government with the support of social activists framed rules for them for the provision of basic amenities like food, cloth and shelter. The Justice Party's Government in the Madras Presidency brought about many welfare measures for alleviating the sufferings of these classes. Provision of amenities to the Depressed Classes, appointment of officials to implement the welfare measures and inspection of the amelioration works, admission to primary education, opening of more co-operative societies formed the agenda of the Government's Programme and they were introduced systematically during the colonial period. Further, by the Temple Entry Movement and by subsequent government measures they were also allowed to enter the temples all over Tamil Nadu. This was a remarkable step in the development of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu during the Colonial period.

It is also to be noted here that the Labour Department also had done a commendable work in the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. Promotion of Elementary Education, provision of house sites, water supply, health and employment opportunities and free mid-day meals to children were undertaken by the Department and were efficiently carried on by District Labour Officers and other officials. They took care of the welfare of the Depressed Classes and the downtrodden communities who gradually began to enjoy the concessions and rights which were once denied to them. Acts like Elementary Education Act (1920), Government Orders of various Departments of the Madras Presidency, Resolutions of Madras Legislative Councils, Amelioration measures by Madras Corporation and District and Local Boards which were introduced periodically, improved substantially the conditions of the Depressed Classes during the colonial era<sup>9</sup>. The opening of Labour Schools, sanction of scholarships and stipends to very needy Depressed Class candidates seeking admission into Arts, Science and professional institutions, maintenance of hostels for the candidates and offer of grants to them, provision of mid-day meals to the school children and the grant

of subsidies to philanthropic organizations working for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes were some of the outstanding activities carried on by the Labour Department of the Government of the Madras Presidency.

In the post-Independence period, more welfare measures were introduced for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes and Tribes who were catalogued and included in proper Scheduled lists. The Central and State Governments took vigorous steps for the progress of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes during this period. Committees like L.Elayaperumal Committee were formed to discuss the problems confronted by the Depressed Classes. Proposals like introduction of Untouchability (offence) Act (1955) were made and financial aid and loans were offered to the Depressed Classes for their efforts to pursue education and employment activities. The Labour Department was renamed as Harijan Welfare Department in 1949 and its officials greatly exerted themselves for the promotion of the interests of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

During the 20 years from 1947 to 1967, in the period of the Congress Party's rule laudable efforts were taken for the progress of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. During this period, by the quota system, sufficient percentage was allocated to these classes in the admission into the Arts and Science Colleges, Engineering and Medical institutions and Training Organisations and hostels and also in the appointments in various Governmental organizations. Harijan schools were opened and extra-ordinary care was taken to encourage the students of these classes. Construction of new schools and repairs of old schools were undertaken for encouraging more number candidates to attend to schools. Steps were taken to abolish untouchability and discrimination was dealt with severely. All students irrespective of castes and members of the society were given equal rights. The Civil Disabilities Act with Amendments was strictly enforced to bring about social equality and higher benefits to these classes. Amounts for hostel facilities, scholarships, provision of Mid-Day meals and purchase of Books etc., were increased. Housing sites were also allotted to them for the construction of comfortable residences. Agricultural loans were offered to those engaged in agricultural operations. More co-operative societies were opened for them to offer all kinds of facilities to them. Incentives were also given to them to enthusiastically pursue economic activities. Health facilities were also provided to them along with medical aid and subsidies. In fact, a notable progress was witnessed in the condition of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in socio-economic spheres during the period 1947-1967.

Greater progress was witnessed during the last quarter of the twentieth century in the conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Particularly, through several legislations, number of welfare measures were undertaken by the Government of Tamil Nadu. The Constitution of India (1950) provided number of safeguards to the Depressed Classes and envisaged programmes for the upliftment of these classes. Violations of the clauses in the constitution invited severe penalties and heavy punishments. Legislations like The Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955), The Untouchability (offences) Amendments and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (1976), the Protection of Civil Rights Rules (1977) and Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1995) were greatly instrumental in developing the conditions of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. There was undoubtedly a remarkable progress in the lives of the Depressed Classes because of these legislations.

During the period 1967-2001, the Governments of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) actively carried on the Welfare activities for the

Scheduled Castes and Tribes. The assignment work of the Harijan Welfare Department was taken over by Tamilnadu Adi-Dravidar and Welfare Department in 1979. More amelioration works like opening of schools, admission to all branches of Education on a concessional basis, provision of mid-day meals, offer of scholarships and stipends, reservation of seats in educational institutions and offer of appointments in various government organizations and more upliftment activities were carried on during this period also. Further, due recognition was also given to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes because of legislations and also because of their rise in various spheres of human activity. As a result of this, their life-styles also changed which gave them a good status in the society. The government's incentive of encouragement to inter-caste marriages further improved the lives of these classes. The government appointments, land grants and offer of house sites to these classes empowered them economically. Thus, the development of the condition of the Depressed Classes in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in socio-economic spheres was very much notable due to the steadfast efforts of the social reformers, social activists and Depressed Class leaders and also due to the welfare measures of the Tamilnadu State government and upliftment programmes and benign legislations of the Government of India<sup>10</sup>.

### **Emergence of Leaders and Social Progress**

Consequent upon these developments, many members of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes had occupied high positions in Tamil Nadu in many spheres of human activity in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the distinguished personalities are, Thiru. P.Kakkan, Minister, Department of Police and Electricity, Government of Tamil Nadu, Thirumathi Satyavani Muthu, both State and Central Minister in different times, Thirumathi Maragatham Chandrasekar, Member of Parliament, Thiru. Selvaraj I.A.S., Thiru Balraj, I.A.S., Thiru. J.Sivanandam, Chairman, Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission, Thiru Parithi Ilamvazhudhi, Minister, Government of Tamil Nadu, Thiru. O.P. Raman, Minister, Government of Tamil Nadu, Thiru. A. Padmanabhan, Chief Secretary, Government of Tamil Nadu, who made a mark in their respective fields because of the remarkable development that took place in the conditions of the Depressed Classes.

### **Conclusion**

The historical progress of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu signifies the transition from the deep-rooted marginalization of society to the movement of the next step towards progressive empowerment as a result of the collective actions of some courageous social reformers, devoted administrators, and the government with the execution of legislative actions, welfare schemes, and educational policies. The social change brings about access to education, jobs, and socio-economic amenities with the gradual erosion of the social hierarchies which existed for a long time, embracing more people from society. The distancing of distinguished leadership from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the political, administrative, and social arenas eradicates the effectiveness of the actions taken and signifies the potentiality of the long-term inclusive policies with the generation of equity. The present study underscores the aspect of the possibility of social change with the combined activation of safeguards of the law, social frameworks of policies, which signifies the purposeful action of immense significance in the social movement towards social justice, dignity, and equality of the deprived social class with the sense of social equity as envisioned under the constitution of the land.

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