
Research Papers



THE STATUS OF DEPRESSED CLASS IN THANJAVUR DISTRICT (1858 TO 1967)

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Abstract

The nineteenth century witnessed radical changes in the social history of Tamil Nadu. The process which was started at the beginning of the nineteenth century received an added impetus in the decades before and after the attainment of Independence. A society faces challenges and responses. Tribal conflicts and the pains that arise in wresting food from hostile and inhospitable nature necessarily bring about social interaction. The present study traces the status of depressed class people in Thanjavur district from 1858 to 1967.

Introduction

Depressed class as a name generally applied to person in the lowest rank with in the Hindu society. The Depressed class should mean a group of people pressed down. The Webster dictionary vividly describes the 'untouchables' as "a member of a large hereditary group in India having in traditional Hindu belief and quality of defiling by contact the person, food or drink of a member of a higher castes and formerly being strictly segregated and restricted to Menial work". Again to denote the depressed class people, the terms suppressed, oppressed, repressed and submerged were also used.¹ The disabilities suffered by the depressed castes all over the country. Prior to its abolition were perhaps the ugliest manifestation of man's inhumanity to man. While in the western countries, the disabilities of the lower classes and the slaves were either social or economic; in India they were also religious. They were prohibited not only from touching the

superior castes but also from approaching them within prescribed distances.²

They were also prohibited 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. Aiyappan calls "contact taboo" by which "persons by reason of their birth or physiological or ritual state act as carriers of pollution and induce temporarily a similar state in others by their contact either direct or within a prescribed distance with impurity has to be removed by ritual means to restore those polluted to their original condition."³

Thanjavur District is one of the popular agricultural district in Tamil Nadu. Most of the Depressed Class people belonged to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes though they were the backbone of the agricultural society. Among the total population in this district half of them were depressed class.⁴ But the status of depressed class

in Thanjavur District were not so well. So this paper analyse the real status of depressed class people in the district particularly from 1858 to 1967. During the study period Thanjavur district consists of 13 taluks. According to the Census report of 1961, the total population of this district was 3140961. Among the total population 23.21 percent were Scheduled Castes and 0.15 percent were Scheduled Tribes.⁵

Depressed Class in Thanjavur District

According to the Census report Paraiyas, Valluvas, Chakkiliyas, Pallas, Kuravan and Nayadi communities were considered as depressed class in Thanjavur district.

Paraiyas

The word 'Paraiya' is derived from the root word 'parai' which means a kind of drum. The paraiyas once considered, traditional drum beaters.⁶ The paraiyas for outnumber any other caste in the Thanjavur district. In 1961 the total number of the paraiyas in this district is 2,36,208. They were the major labour class in Thanjavur. They were depressed both in economically and social.⁷

Valluvas

Valluvas are actually a section of the paraiyas. The valluvas occupied the pride of place in the ancient Tamil society. The valluvas as royal priests who performed funeral obsequies in the king's household. When the Brahmin priest replace them, the status of the valluvas to deteriorate. The valluvas were socially and economically depressed during the 19th century. According to the 1961 census they were 7,508 in number.⁸

Chakkiliyas

The Chakkiliyas are also one of the lowest castes in Thanjavur district. They came from the Telugu and Kannada regions. Chakkiliyas are leather makers. It is their duty to remove the dead cattle from villages. In Thanjavur district the population of chakkiliyas in 1961 was 8017.⁹ In some part of the district they speak Telugu and wear namam. This people also socially and economically depressed in Thanjavur district.

Pallas

The word 'pallam' in Tamil means, a pit or low living region. The name 'pallan' could have been derived from the word pallam. They have separate places for residence called pallacheri. The pallas are a well organized community and they are sub-divided into a number of sub-sects. The pallas an important were the major agricultural labours in Thanjavur. Their total

population in Thanjavur was 1, 91,658.¹⁰ But socially and economically they depressed in Thanjavur district.

Social Status of Depressed Class in Thanjavur District

In Tamil Nadu the historical process worked much against the interest of the Tamils. As the result of internal dissensions and external conquests, the invaders mostly from the northern areas, moved into the land and reduced the Tamils to servitude. The conquered Tamils being deprived of political authority and possession of lands found themselves reduced to the status of untouchables. They were not recognized as Hindus. They were neither admitted to the temples nor to the traditional caste system. They were almost reduced to the status of untouchables and they had to suffer several social disabilities.¹¹ When the British came to India, they compromised with the dominant communities.

The prominent Tamil communities like the Maravas, the Kallars, the Nadars, the Paravars, the Pallars and the Paraiyas became the victims of social oppression. Social ostracism, religious excommunication and wholesale exclusion of the people were the main cause of the phenomenon of untouchability in Tamil Nadu. The deep-rooted social taboos were the basis for the evil. The ostracized people were, called by the term 'Chandalas'. It appears that all those who did not conform of the Aryan way of life and Brahmana ascendancy in the society were labeled Chandalas or Untouchables.¹² There are three religious sets dwelling in all over Thanjavur district. Hindus were the major religious sect in this district. The Brahmins has is occupied an important position in Hindu sect. They played vital role in temple festivals and ceremonies. Various kinds of disabilities and harassments were imposed on the depressed class people in Thanjavur district.

One of the in human practice prevailed in Thanjavur district was pannaiyal system. Most of the pannaiyal come from depressed class. They were not permitted to work independently. They were the landless tenants and suppressed by the landlords. Pannaiyar were brutally punished the people those who were against them. The punishments like the horse chip beat and coddung drink etc. The panniyals those worked under the mirasdars as traditionally without any expectation, they were treated as slaves.¹³ The depressed class people shall not wear any ornament of gold and silver. The depressed class males should not be

allowed to wear their clothes below their knees or above the hips. Their males not to wear coats, shirts and banyans. This people only used earthenware vessels. Their women should not be allowed to cover the upper portion of their bodies with clothes or ravukkais. Their women should not to use flowers and saffron paste. They were not allowed to use umbrellas for protection against sun and rain not should they were sandal. The members of depressed classes did not have access to public wells, tanks and roads. The depressed class residence was called 'cheri' or slum. The cheri people had to draw drinking water from stinking muddy unhygienic pools. This people were denied to enter the temples. The two tumbler system used to depressed people in village tea shops. The depressed class people could not seek admission to certain schools and colleges and prevented from getting education. The breath of a member of the depressed class was regarded as polluting the people of the higher castes.¹⁴

Economic status of depressed class in Thanjavur

The economic status of the depressed class in Thanjavur was not so well. Most of them were landless tenants. This was the prime factor for their miserable condition. Kuttagai system also crushed the people. Depressed class people worked in the field for minimum daily wages. They depend upon the mirasdars for their needs. They worked as coolies from 4.30 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. Their wages shall be for men Rs. 4/- and for women Rs. 2/- per day.¹⁵ The landlords who got a land from the government and distributed it to the farmers they were called share croppers. The share croppers took the full charge of the cultivation. Normally a landowner will come and watch the harvest and got his share. Share croppers mostly come from depressed class. Without any expenditure all the profits were enjoyed by the landlords.¹⁶ So depressed class people economically depressed.

Socio-economic Legislations on Depressed Class (1858-1967)

The British Government introduced lot of legislations to the welfare of depressed class people. After independence the Government of India as well as the Government of Tamilnadu took some reform measures for the eradication social injustice and the improvement of their status. Some of the legislations related to the depressed class is given below:

· The Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850.

- The Removal of Civil Disabilities (Madras Act XXI of 1938).
- The Madras Removal of Disabilities Act of 1938.
- Temple Entry Disabilities Removal Act of 1933.
- Madras Temple Entry Authorization and Indemnity Act of 1939 (Madras Act No. XXII of 1939)
- Civil Disabilities Act of 1947.
- The Untouchable (offence) Act of 1955.
- Minimum Wages Act of 1948.
- Thanjavur Pannaiyals Protection Act 1952.
- Tamilnadu Cultivating Tenants Protection Act 1955.
- Tamilnadu Land Reforms Fixation of Ceiling Land Act of 1961.
- Thanjavur Tenants and Pananiyal Protection Act 1967.¹⁷

Conclusion

The status of the depressed class in the study period was a pathetic one. There was deep-rooted jealousy between 'the haves and the have nots.' Untouchability was a virus eating the body-politic of the Tamil society in the nineteenth century. When the British came to Tamil Nadu, they found social disabilities and social ostracism among the castes. It is really admirable on the part of the British Government which aimed at the promotion of the social welfare of the state. After independence, the government of India provides the constitutional guarantee to the abolition of social disabilities of the people. The legislations passed by the government of India as well as the government of Tamil Nadu are a real boon to the upliftment of the depressed class in Tamil Nadu as well as in Thanjavur district.

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