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## DALITS' CONDITION AND PRACTICE OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY TAMIL NADU

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**Abstract:**-The Hindu social system is socio-religious. The social institutions are intimately connected with religion. The religious books, the repository of social codes, are considered to be of divine origin. This system is infallible and indisputable to the majority. The society is so rigidly graded that those at the top of the social ladder—the Brahmins are inalienably vested with the authority of learning, teaching and interpreting the shastras, By distorting the interpretation of the shastras and stamping the later accretions with divinity, they ascribe to themselves congenital superiority, which has resulted in an intricate, illogical and irreligious system of descending inferiority and ascending superiority complexes in the society. The caste system, intended originally for social cohesion, and as a device for labour division is inelastic and birth based. It has given rise to innumerable endogamous groups and to a section regarded as outcaste, unsociable and untouchable. Such a social system militates against any change even through an evolutionary process. It resulted in the pathetic condition of the dalits and a strict observance of untouchability for centuries in Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords:** Untouchables, Dalits, Samaj, Mirasi, Caste, Pariah.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Socio-Religious Reform Organisations

Many attempts were made in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries by the socio-religious reformers, religious zealots and eclectics to purge the system of social evils and to eliminate inequalities heaped upon the lower castes. Many socio-religious and secular organizations emerged on the Indian scene. Of these, the Brahmo Samaj, the Satya Shodhak Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Depressed Classes Mission, the National Social Conferences, the Provincial Social Conferences, and the All-India Anti-Untouchability League, and the many small sects such as the Satnaniis, the Radhaswamis, the Shikshaparas, the Sheonarayanis, the Monik Kalis, the Kumbhipatias and the Kala Chandis directly or indirectly not only voiced against the inequalities between man and man, caste and caste, and group and group but also called for and contributed to the uplift of the untouchables.

It is in the light of the emergence and efforts of these organizations and those of the Christian missionaries, the Pioneers in the field that the socio-economic condition of the depressed classes has to be studied to establish a proper perspective. Since India is virtually a continent united in a single State, the conditions of the people vary widely from province to province and from district to district within certain provinces. Thus to minimize the hazards of generalization, it will be equally essential to make attempt a province-wise analysis of the socio-economic condition of the depressed classes

#### Three Broad Groups

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Madras Presidency was the biggest of all the British provinces except Burma. The conditions then prevailing in the Presidency were 'in a sense peculiar and perhaps without a parallel in any other part of India.<sup>1</sup> Geographically it was remotely located. The means of communication were comparatively undeveloped. Socially, the society was virtually divided into three broad groups -the Brahmins, the non-Brahmins and the untouchables. The Brahmins enjoyed an extraordinarily high position in the Social hierarchy. The spirit of sectarianism among certain castes is greatest there.<sup>2</sup> Casteism in its tyrannical and typically perverted form was prevalent in the Tamil Nadu. The extraordinary

observance of the caste rules and regulations, the caste privileges and rigidities was possible because of (i) the comparative insularity of the region from the Mohammedan invasions, and the presence of a very small Muslim Population; (ii) the non-existence of any powerful Hindu protestant movement, and (iii) the inability of the Christian 'missionaryism' to affect the caste climate of the Tamil Nadu due to the tough opposition of the orthodox Hindus, and the surrender of the missionaries themselves to the caste rules in the South.<sup>3</sup> Politically much had changed in "the benighted Presidency"<sup>4</sup> of Madras but socially, it continued to be so even in the second decade of the Twentieth Century.

### Pollution- Purity

The untouchables who formed one-sixth of the total population lived in sub-human conditions, and were treated inhumanly by the rest. The worst form of social ostracism was prevalent in Tamil Nadu. It was here only that the most polluting categories – the unapproachable, the unshadowables and the unseeables – of the untouchables were found. It was here only that the distanced specified to avoid atmospheric human pollution were perniciously maintained. B.Dc, I.C.S. stated in 1910 "In Madras, or rather in the Dravidian tract which includes, the Madras Presidency, Mysore, Hyderabad, Travancore and Cochin, there are no fewer than five classes aggregating 19,294,021 souls, whose touch in the case of one class is supposed to pollute, and in the case of other four it actually pollutes, while there is one class aggregating 7,755,901 souls which pollute even without touching. Mr. Anantha Krishna Iyer, in his very interesting work on the Cochin tribes and castes, says of the Nayadis, whom he describes as the Chandalas of the plains, that they can with much difficulty cross public roads. They pollute a Brahman by approaching him within a distance of 300 feet. Of another caste Ullandans whom he describes as the lowest caste among the pure Malayali Hindus and animistic castes of Cochin, he says that the approach of members of this caste within a distance of 84 feet pollutes Brahmins and all the higher castes including the Sudras (Nairs). Of another caste the Patayans who numbered 8,841 souls at the last census he says that the approach of a member of it carries pollution to members of the higher castes to about half a furlong They cannot walk along the public roads, nor in the vicinity of houses occupied by people of the higher castes.<sup>5</sup>

Even on those public roads where they were permitted to walk, they had to scurry off the road if a person of a higher caste happened to come along. The Madras Labour Commissioner reported in 1919 that 'an English gentleman while driving through a municipal town with a student, was surprised at a request from his neighbor that he might be allowed to get down and walk and join him later on. He was still more surprised to find from his companion that his reason for descending was that owing to his caste he was not allowed to pass through a particular street'.<sup>6</sup> They were denied access to public wells, tanks, and temples. The inexorable custom of untouchability condemned them to live on the outskirts far away from the villages or in hamlets of their own, known as 'paracheries' in Tamil Nadu. These 'paracheries' have no wells and when drought dries up the surface pools, the inmates have to stand about near the wells of the caste-folk, waiting until some charitable hand shall draw them a little water.<sup>7</sup> Theoretically entry into the Government institutions was open to every one but, in practice the Dalits had to stay away from them. They were denied access to schools. They could not get into certain Post offices either to post letters or to get a stamp. They were not admitted into the choultries despite the fact that these were built for the poor and the needy. Even when they were to appear as a witness before the court, they had to stay outside at a certain distance and the evidence was recorded with the help of a mediator. Worst of all, in spite of their having been appointed to a certain office, they failed to function. The editor of India in 1920 reported, 'These extraordinary social restrictions, so it is related, operate so powerfully that on a respectable Panchama gentleman being appointed to a seat on a Municipality, five members, including a Muhammadan, immediately sent in their resignations and were with difficulty induced to withdraw.'<sup>8</sup>

### Sinister Form of Untouchability

The most sinister form of untouchability permeated uniformly the whole of Madras Presidency would be an exaggeration. Its intensity, in fact, varied in different parts of the Presidency. On the west coast, the social disabilities being faced by the dalits were more acute.<sup>9</sup> It was mainly in about 'six districts of the Madras Presidency more than one person in every five is theoretically not allowed to come within a distance of 64 feet of the higher castes without causing pollution.<sup>10</sup> It was only in Tinnevely that a class of unseeables called Purada Vannas was reported to have existed. And in the district of South Kanara, a class known as Ande Koraga whose members were required to carry a spittoon round their neck, and were not permitted to expectorate on the public road, was reported. Thus, the majority of the members of the dalits, though they suffered severally, and universally from the social disabilities, and were denied the elementary civic rights, were not social helots of the categories of unseeables and 'spittoon carriers'.

All the untouchables in Tamil Nadu are not equally and universally share the exploitative and selfish features of the economic life. Their economic condition varied not only vertically but also horizontally. The Board of Revenue, Madras in its proceedings, dated 5 November 1892, pointed out that the condition of the Pariahs was not equally deplorable even in all parts of certain districts. The untouchables working in the neighbourhood of Madras, and in the salt factories got good wages. 'On the borders its ranges, too, mirasi loses some of its most forbidding features (the paracheri site for instance not being claimed), though it is equally true that its example infects non-mirasi villages. Oppression is worst in the three southern taluks, and of these, perhaps, worst of all in Chengleput'.<sup>11</sup>

According to the Census Report for 1911, 70.66 percent of the total population of the Madras Presidency was engaged

in agriculture and allied professions, 13.35 per cent in industry, 6.61 per cent in trade, 2.47 per cent in public administration and professions like religion, law, medicine, instruction and liberal arts, 1.36 per cent in transport, 0.5 per cent in army, navy and Police, and 0.49 per cent as domestic servants.<sup>12</sup> Many of these avenues were not open to the dalits either because they lacked the professional prerequisites or the sinister bar of untouchability debarred them. They could not be traders as no one would sell and purchase from them, they could not be engaged in transport as none of the higher castes would board the transport they plied or worked in; they could not be employed as domestic servants as they by their very presence would pollute the premises the water and the food; their recruitment in the army and police was banned; and for the professions like law, medicine instruction, liberal arts, and public administration they were not permitted to be qualified.

The editor of India in 1919 observed, 'They have no education, because they cannot afford to take advantage of it even if it is proffered free.'<sup>13</sup> Only agriculture and industry were open to them. But their position here too was of the lowest paid labourers, of serfs and of slaves. They were condemned to the most degrading forms of labour.<sup>14</sup> In the industrial field, tanneries were their exclusive domain. In other industries such as salt and weaving they were employed only for hard, menial, and dirty jobs. In agriculture, their economic condition was still worse. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the land was held by the Vellalas in the Tamil areas, Balija Naidus in both the Telugu and Tami districts. Both Tamil and Telugu Brahmins also had sizeable landholdings, however.<sup>15</sup> Out of the total area of Presidency, 29 per cent, was zamindari and the remaining was ryotwari. The dalit members were neither zamindars nor ryots. They were agricultural labourers, both bonded and free. They were not permitted to have even Government Darkhast land. Their applications were disposed of 'on the irrelevant and frivolous grounds of tank-bed land, water-storage, village-common, etc.'<sup>16</sup> The Controller of Chingleput in his report to the Board of 1890 observed, 'The agricultural labourer is always badly nourished. clad if at all in the vilest of rags; huddled like pigs; untaught, uncared for and unpitied.'<sup>17</sup> The relationship between the agricultural labourers belonging to the dalits and the landholding classes was not of simple subordination and superordination; rather it was of master and slave. They were exploited and oppressed. The disobedience on their part was tyrannically and subtly punished.

#### Forms of Punishment for the Disobedience

The Board of Revenue, Madras in its report, referred to the forms of punishments inflicted on Pariahs:

To punish disobedience of Pariahs, their masters

- (a) Bring false cases in the village courts or in the criminal courts.
- (b) Obtain, on application, from Government waste lands lying all round the paracheri, so as to impound the Pariah's cattle or obstruct the way to their temple.
- (c) Have mirasi names fraudulently entered in the government account against the paracheri.
- (d) Pull down the huts and destroy the growth in the backyards.
- (e) Deny occupancy rights in immemorial sub-tenancies
- (f) Forcibly cut the Pariahs' crops, and on being resisted charge them with theft and rioting.
- (g) Under misrepresentations, get them to execute documents by which they are afterwards ruined.
- (h) Cut off the flow of water from their fields.
- (i) Without legal notice, have the property of sub-tenant attached for the landlord's arrears of revenues.<sup>18</sup>

The Pariahs failed to get any effective redress against these excesses. India did not 'breed village Hampdens'.<sup>19</sup> Nor did the depressed have enough means to file the case in the court. Besides casteism was equally effective in the lower courts. The members of the higher castes would support only their brethren, the wealthy landlords and ryots. The all-powerful hand of the British Raj also failed to protect effectively the dalits against the subtle tyrannies of the caste Hindus. It rather acquiesced to their highhandedness. M.C. Rajah, complaining against the Indian administrative personnels stated: "Those of them of them (Caste Hindus) that got into the subordinate branches of the administrative machine, from the highest Deputy Collector or Commissioner and subordinate Judge to the lowest urban police constable or village Headman carried on the merry game of tyranny and oppression of the common people, for both they and people knew fully well that behind the meanest policeman stood all the absolutism of the Indian Government backed by the full might of the British Empire."<sup>20</sup> Whatever produce they got as wages was also not properly valued. The hideous bar of untouchability worked to their economic disadvantage: 'a labourer or small farmer belonging to the dalits is continually a loser in buying his ordinary purchase or in disposing of his produce through his inability to enter a shop or even to pass through many of the streets where the shopkeepers live'.<sup>21</sup> To sum up, the social disabilities extended to the minutest operations of daily life and had a strong bearing on the economic condition of the dalits in the Presidency.

#### END NOTES

1. Memorandum on Communal Representation by K. V. Reddy dated 12 August 1919, Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill, III, Appendices, p. 51.
2. Ibid.

3. Thomas, P., *Christians and Christianity in India and Pakistan*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1954, p. 70. (i) According to him, Robert de Nobili treated caste as a matter of social and not of religious concern, and did not make the abandonment of caste a condition of baptism.

(ii) In the first quarter of the seventeenth century, there started a controversy over the wearing of the sacred cord (which signifies place in the Hindu social hierarchy of represents the division of the society into dvija and non-dvija (castes) by the dvija Hindu converts to Christianity. In 1623, Pope Gregory XV issued a notable bull: 'Desiring to procure the conversion of these nations, after suitable discussion we accord to the Brahmins and other Gentiles the cord and the kudumi, sandal paste and purification of the body.' Thomas, P., op.cit., p.7!.

(iii) Till recently Syrian Christians rigidly observed caste system and untouchability. Slaves and low castes were not allowed to enter a Syrian Church and Christian Household. Thomas, P., op.cit., p.234.

(iv) Stephen Neill, *The Story of the Christian Church Pakistan*, pp. 87-88. Thomas, P., op.cit., p. 190. He states, 'The missionaries in Bengal, unlike their brethren in the South were uncompromising Caste.'

4. Mehrotta, S.R., *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress*, Vikas Publishing, Delhi, 1971, p.55

5. De, B., 'The Depressed Classes' in *Indian Review*, Madras, March 1910, pp. 166-167.

6. *India in 1920*, p. 157. Valentine Chirol said that 'In Cochin a few years ago I was crossing a bridge and just in front of me walked a respectable-looking native. He suddenly turned tail and, running back to the end of the bridge from which we had both come plunged out of sight into the Jungle on the side of the road. He had seen a Brahmin entering o to the bridge from the other end, and he had fled incontinently rather than incur the resentment of that high caste gentle man by inflicting upon him the 'pollution' of forbidden propinquity as the bridge, though a fairly broad one, was not wide enough for them to pass each other at the prescribed distance.' *Indian Review Madras*, September 1910, p. 698. Mrs. Annie Besant said that 'Even now they scurry off the road if a Hindu of a superior class comes along; if the latter is forced to speak to one, he speaks from a distance.' *Ibid.*, Madras, February 1909, p. 116.

7. Abstract of Proceedings of the Board of Revenue dated 5 November 1892, no.723; *Indian Statutory Commission, (ISC.)*, Vol.XVII, Part.II, p. 80.

8. *India in 1920*, Calcutta, 1920, p. 158.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 157. Extracts from the Proceedings of the Indian Legislative Council assembled under the provisions of the Government of India Act, 1915: *Government of India, Home Department Proceedings*, July 1916, nos. 130-31.

10. *India in 1920*, Calcutta, 1920, p.156.

11. Abstracts from the Proceedings of the Board of Revenue dated 5 November 1892, no. 723; *ISC.*, Vol.XVII, Part.II, p. 280.

12. *Census of India Report*, 1911, Vol.I, India, Part. I, Calcutta, 1913, p. 432.

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