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DISABILITIES OF THE UNTOUCHABLES IN SOUTHERN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract :

The untouchables had to bear many miseries and they were humiliated in the society. Among the many circumstances which go to produce the depressed state untouchability is prominent. The untouchables were labeled as outcastes by Brahmin interpretations of Hinduism. Such outcaste in a caste society lack both identity and self respect.⁵⁹ The untouchables were recorded as polluting higher castes by their contact. In the widest term, untouchability may be defined as the practice of imposing social disabilities on persons by reasons of their birth in certain castes. But in the more widely used specific sense I.P.Desai defined the practice of untouchability as the avoidance of physical contact with persons and things because of belief relating to pollution in contemporary India especially in country side.



Key Words: Untouchables, Caste Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Depressed Classes, Tamil Nadu, Untouchability, Madras Presidency, Varna, Puratavannars, Adi Dravidas, Sudra.

INTRODUCTION :

In social ladder, the untouchables were placed at the lowest end. They were not be touched by any person. They had no social respect. In some parts of the country, they were not even allowed to wash their clothes during day time.¹ They were discriminated in many ways in the caste ridden Tamil society in the contemporary period. Even though the British rule gave priority to the elevation of the Untouchables, they were unable to enjoy those benefits because of the social discrimination and economic exploitation of the land owned communities.

EDUCATIONAL DISABILITY

The children of the untouchables were not permitted to mingle with children of the high caste. In some religious works it is stated that the untouchables should not study religious books. If somehow or other if a son of an untouchable insisted on study, he was required to it outside the class.² In the traditional Hindu society, the scheduled castes were the most backward in education. They had no opportunity to read and write. This was one of the reasons, why the other castes were not only able to suppress them but also delegate menial jobs to them. Education was monopolished and taken away by the high caste Hindus. Having been regarded as the outcastes for centuries, educational opportunity was denied to the depressed classes. Their parents were not well aware of the gains of educating their children and did not send them to school. Instead, they sent the children to high caste Hindus to tend their cattle or work

in the agrarian fields. Due to poverty, some parents kept their children as bonded labourers under the caste Hindus. Though some were very eager to acquire education, caste Hindus prevented them from entering into schools. The parents of the caste Hindu pupils objected to send their children to school where the depressed class children were admitted. The school masters also shared this discrimination making the untouchable children sit outside the school and teaching from a distance. The depressed class children were neither allowed to sit on the benches provided in the class room nor allowed to pass through the streets of the schools where caste Hindu children studied. Many cases were reported from all over the Madras Presidency on the question of admitting non-caste Hindu children to schools situated in caste Hindu streets. Even the untouchable teachers were not allowed to travel together with caste Hindus in a common vehicle.³

The Government of Madras conducted an enquiry which revealed that ignorance, poverty, suppression and oppression were the causes responsible for their miserable condition and that the remedy was educational opportunity and good direction. In that context, the Madras Provincial Government undertook the work of the amelioration of the depressed classes. In the year 1858, the British Government issued an order that the educational institutions should be opened to all classes without any discrimination after the transfer of the power from the East India Company to the British Crown. Thus it was considered the beginning of the Government direct participation in the education of the depressed classes.

ECONOMIC DISABILITIES

The depressed classes had to face economic and religious disabilities too. They could not own property. They were not permitted to purchase a piece of land. They were not supposed to amass wealth, Due to their engagements in unrewarding professions, their income was very low. Sometimes they were required to cultivate the land of their land lords without any payment. A similar situation continued between other groups of landlords and depressed classes in eastern Ramnad, Tirunelveli and Madurai districts of Tamil Nadu.

RELIGIOUS DISABILITY

In the religious domain, the greatest disability was that the depressed class people could not enter the temples. They had no right to worship Gods, and Goddesses in the temple. An untouchable could not make a holy tip in the holy river. He could not perform any religious ceremony.

CIVIC DISABILITIES

Many contemporary empirical studies indicate that untouchability continues to be an important component of the experience of depressed classes. The depressed class formed about one-fifth of the total population of the then Madras Presidency. Though most of them professed Hindu religion and had sub-castes among themselves, they were invariably treated as outcastes by other caste people. The Scheduled Castes form a considerable size of population of Tamil Nadu. According to 1981 Census, they numbered 88.81 lakhs and formed 18.35% of the total population. But compared to the all India average, the proportion of depressed class in the Tamil society was greater. In some districts, the proportion of depressed class was higher especially in the wet and irrigated areas. But in the Nineteenth Century, most depressed class in the irrigated districts happened to be were bonded labourers to the local land lords. They formed the lowest stratum of the Tamil society.⁴ Education was denied to them. Land ownership was looked upon with disfavour. Public roads and wells were closed as also other basic civic rights. They lived in huts segregated from main habitation.⁵ The advent of the British heralded some changes in their status. The British introduced a series of welfare measures for their elevation.

UNTOUCHABLES - GRADATION

The whole set of gradations prescribed among castes was based on the idea of purity of the Brahmins and the utter impurity of the depressed classes. The most fantastic belief was that the breath or even the shadow of an untouchable would pollute another person. In some places, untouchables were required to wear cloth over their mouths in order that their breath might not pollute. The water of a stream was polluted if a Sudra was permitted to walk across a bridge over it. Even the glance of a man of low caste falling on a cooking pot, the contents of the pot would necessarily be thrown away. Public roads which came near temples could not be travelled by depressed classes.⁶

There is no part of the country in which outcaste races are not to be found under various designations. They were described by various names such as untouchables, unapproachables, depressed classes, Adi Dravidas, Panchamas, Outcastes, *Avarnas*, exterior castes, Scheduled Castes and so on. They called themselves Fifth *Varna*. The term Scheduled Castes is the expression standardized in the Constitution of the Republic of India. According to the convention of ancient society, the Fifth *Varna* comprised those outside the circumference of *Chaturvarna* System was deemed depressed class.

Depressed classes are educationally, economically and socially backward and came under the category of Untouchables. These people have been looked down by the caste Hindus through the ages.⁷ The epithet "depressed" denotes not only low status in the hierarchy of caste combined with religious and social disabilities but also a low economic condition.⁸ In the 1920s, they were called Adi-Dravidas, Adi-Andhras, Adi- Karnatakas etc.

By the 1920s, the English expressions 'untouchable' and 'untouchability' were widely used as terms for the quality of collective uncleanliness. Gandhi's writings on Indian social and moral topics were particularly directed to change their status. Most of his publications in 1920s and 1930s contained passionate polemics about the doctrine of untouchability. He had stated that untouchability was a horrible and terrible strain on the Hindu faith and it was an evil and insult to religion and humanity. In 1921, in an effort to break away from their outcaste status, Madras depressed class s asked the Government to recognize a new name for them.

They demanded that they should be designated as Adi Dravidas or the original Dravidas, thus bringing them into line with the non-Brahmin Hindus who are called Dravidas.⁹ The Madras Government agreed the name change. As shown in the Madras Census of 1921, some depressed class appeared under the category of Adi Dravida. Between 1921 and 1931, their number jumped from 1.5-1.6 million. The various depressed class e groups probably changed their name to Adi Dravidas, taking advantage of the possibility of bettering their position by gaining a new identity. Adi Dravida was the new name for the Tamil speaking depressed class.¹⁰ Gandhi adopted a new word Harijan instead of the depressed classes. The term was widely employed since 1930s.¹¹

Although the depressed class found it easy to acquire a new name and to receive official accreditation for it, their effort to shed their caste inferiority was a long and arduous process. The higher castes were reluctant to accept their identity. Through this new identity, the depressed class wished to remove the stigma associated with untouchability and to be treated as equals by the higher castes.¹²

OBSERVATION OF POLLUTION -PURITY

The system of pollution was more intensive in the South than in the North. In the Tamil Country, no caste Hindu would touch an outcaste. Even his very presence would pollute a Brahmin and other higher caste Hindus. In some places even their foot prints were deemed to defile the whole neighbourhood. The lower castes were deemed to pollute a Brahmin if they approached him within a specified distance. The extreme form of pollution, namely the pollution of sight was also in vogue in some parts of Tamil Country. Hutton, in the Census of 1931, recorded that in the district of Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari there was a class of unseeables, a caste of washerman known as *Puratavannan* who washed the clothes of the untouchables and therefore deemed to be doubly polluting. They had to work between midnight and day break and were not allowed to come out during the day

time because the very sight of them was deemed to be polluting.¹³ On 26th February 1933, a conference of the *Puratavannars* was held in Tirunelveli. Since they washed the clothes of the depressed class, they were considered inferior to them. In this conference, the *Puratavannars* passed resolution to include them in the list of the Adi Dravidas. Thus it is apparent that the rule of defilement was also very rigid. A Brahmin will not perform even his ablutions within the precincts of a Sudra's habitation.¹⁴

An evidence submitted before the Lee Commission in 1924 stated thus : "Untouchables in such places and before such judges were not permitted to enter the courts, even though they were parties to a case or witnesses".¹⁵ They had to stand far off and their examination was conducted by a go-between, who would go out, question them and take back their answers to the judge.¹⁶ Regarding food there are clean and unclean castes. A clean caste is a non-polluting caste from which a Brahmin would accept water. Men of clean castes would not accept water from unclean castes. If a Brahmin happened to give water to a Sudra he would add a few drops of butter milk to it to avoid pollution. To maintain the system intact, in villages, each caste had its own quarters. In villages in the Ramnad District, the main portions of them were occupied by shepherds, artisans and others. The depressed classes were segregated from the main portions of the villages. They lived on the outskirts of villages without causing pollution of any sort to the clean castes.¹⁷ In villages, unclean castes like Pariahs and Pallas were neither had free access nor permitted to draw water from the wells exclusively meant for the clean castes. The unclean castes were prohibited from entering the temples meant for clean castes. The outcastes had their own wells and temples which the clean castes would not use for the fear of pollutions.

RESTRICTIONS

There were restrictions on the construction of houses. The depressed people were neither allowed to construct houses above one storey nor allowed to call them as houses. They could call them as dung heaps. The low caste people were not permitted to build their houses near the roadside. They were not allowed to wear clothes above waist. They were also refused to wear silver and gold ornaments which were the prerogatives of the higher castes. They could not use umbrellas and shoes as well. In 1931, when they tried to defy such restrictions their huts were set on fire. Their granaries and property were destroyed and their livestock looted.¹⁸ They were not permitted to enter any public market. Hence they did not experience great disadvantage in selling any little produce they happened to possess nor could they enter a shop.

INEQUALITY AND ECONOMIC DISPARITY

Caste system believes that some people are higher than others in intelligence and they are entitled to occupy higher position than the others. On the other hand some people are believed to have low intelligence. They are to be deprived of all privileges and facilities. The caste system has resulted in the creation of two basic problems viz., social inequality and social injustice.¹⁹ The high and low castes were not allowed to mix with each other. The low castes were denied entry into the places of Hindu worship. The low castes were not allowed to draw drinking water from the wells from which high caste draw water. The low castes were destined to do degrading and filling work. Intercaste marriage became a taboo.²⁰

In the economic sphere there was injustice. Since the low castes were poor they led a hand to mouth existence and they found no time to demand justice. The educational backwardness of the depressed class people pushed them back in the social ladder. Since they were poor they could not knock at the door of courts of law.²¹ The depressed class people had no consciousness to organize themselves to demand social justice. In those days the Sudras were forced to work for others in the social hierarchy. Their work was exploited by the higher castes and they became economically rich.²² A Sudra even after getting rid of his master cannot get of slavery because slave is associated with his birth.²³ Thus the economic disparity arose among the castes. Due to racial discrimination and low economic status, the Sudras were not able gain the fruit of western education. The Brahmins studied English education and occupied important posts which were unattainable to the Sudras.²⁴

Thus there occurred a wide gap in the incomes between the high and the low castes which had proportionally created a gap in the field of social justice. The society and the community in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu provide a mixture of economic affluence and depression. The poor in these districts exhibit the conditions of poverty with multifaceted phenomena. The access to land employment is not equally provided among the social groups. Thus the unequal accumulation of wealth and income distribution led for conflicts in southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

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