



**EVOLUTION OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL IDENTITY OF
THE MOST BACKWARD CLASSES IN TAMILNADU****V. Chithra**

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ABSTRACT

The reservation system (quota system) is a social measure designed to safeguard the rights, gains, and privileges of individuals who meet the necessary criteria. The Constitution of India provides a broad framework for this practice. Accordingly, the Indian Government has adopted various social measures for the benefit of socially disadvantaged and highly vulnerable segments of society. To this end, various committees and commissions have been appointed to examine the socio-economic conditions of these historically marginalized and oppressed groups. Based on the recommendations of these bodies, significant social welfare measures aimed at fostering the development of these groups have been implemented. Tamil Nadu is among the leading states in implementing social welfare measures, such as the reservation system, for the most helpless sections of society.



KEYWORDS : *E British, Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, Reservation System, Tamil Nadu.*

INTRODUCTION :

The Sangam period of ancient Tamizhagam was characterized by a horizontal social structure distinguished by values that placed great importance on education, chastity, societal norms, character, humanism, and the dignity of labour. It is noted that during the early stages of the caste system, the divisions were neither rigid nor strictly defined. The ancient Tamil people inhabited diverse natural regions, such as *Kurinji* (mountainous terrain), *Mullai* (forested areas between highlands and lowlands), *Marudham* (riverine plains), *Neydal* (coastal areas), and *Palai* (arid, desert-like regions). The social structure of the Sangam period was highly flexible.¹

The various communities living during the Sangam period included the Vettuvar, Irular, Villiyar, and Pallar.² Tolkappiar has mentioned four classes: Arasar, Andanar, Vanikar, and Vellalar.³ In the Medieval Period, the Tamil population was categorized into two primary religious factions: Saivites and Vaishnavites.⁴ The distinctions of *Valangai* (Right-hand) and *Idangai* (Left-hand) also existed during the

Chola period; these caste groups encompassed numerous sub-groups.⁵ The Bhakti Movement played a significant role in mitigating the rigidity of the caste system.⁶

During British rule, Tamil society consisted of various castes. To gain the support of the native people, the British officials found it necessary to support local landowners and strengthen their positions. The emerging working classes were also divided into distinct caste groups. They introduced certain social reform laws for administrative convenience. Likewise, the administrative policies they pursued gave new momentum to the existing social structure. The Minto- Morley- Reforms Act of 1909 gave Muslims a distinct political identity.⁷ The Justice Party sought to implement social and economic measures for the benefit of non-Brahmins. In 1921, the first community-based Government Order (G.O.) was issued. The approach of allocating roles among different castes and communities was broadened to include positions at all tiers within numerous government departments.⁸ A second community-based Government Order was issued in 1922, introducing provisions for the allocation of posts (quota system) based on community criteria in both recruitment and promotion processes.⁹ In 1927, a third community-based Government Order was issued, and additional posts were allocated through a rotation system (roster system).¹⁰ This communal reservation system remained in effect until 1947.¹¹ The Government of India Act of 1935 allocated memberships for the Legislative Council (M.L.C.) and the Legislative Assembly (M.L.A.) based on community-based representation.¹²

Immediately following independence, the Tamil Nadu Government sought to implement various legal measures to ensure social justice. In this context, the report of the Tamil Nadu Backward Classes Commission (1969) aimed to highlight the constrained circumstances under which it operated, particularly given the fundamental difference between its own mandate and that of the Backward Classes Commission (known as the Kaka Kalelkar Commission) appointed by the Government of India in 1953.¹³ The Kaka Kalelkar Commission had been tasked with defining the criteria for educational and social backwardness, compiling a list of backward classes, and detailing their population and regional distribution. Since the state government already possessed lists of 'Backward Classes' and 'Most Backward Classes', this task was accomplished relatively easily. The primary responsibility was to assess the progress made by each class in three specific areas: education, economic status, and public sector employment.¹⁴ Accordingly, the Commission received written and oral submissions from various groups.

The Commission also accepted petitions and patiently listened to requests from the public. These included applications from 'Forward Classes'-groups not on the existing lists-requesting inclusion in the backward class category. The Commission did not dismiss these petitions and prepared a new list; the two main groups seeking inclusion were Muslims and Christians. Regarding Muslims, a broad 'Lebbai' category had emerged. In the 1921 Census, the Muslim demographic was categorized into four groups: Lebbai, Shaikh, Sayyid, and Pathan. Edgar Thurston verified that the Lebbais are Tamil-speaking Muslims and are already recognized within the backward classes. As per the 1931 Census, they were mostly petty traders and owned many shops in the town.¹⁵ The Government also brought Lebbais in the backward class list in 1956. ¹⁶Additionally, three other groups sought to be added to this list, citing their economic disadvantages; the commission thoroughly reviewed these requests.¹⁷

As for the Christians, leaders of various groups met with the Commission, argued that caste distinctions existed among Muslims as well, and submitted a petition requesting that Christians also be included in the 'Backward Classes' list. The Commission also appraised the socio-economic conditions of the *Vannan* (washermen) and *Navithan* (barbers) communities - a matter that lay beyond the commission's defined scope and mandate.¹⁸

The origins of the 'Most Backward Classes' category traced back to initiatives launched in 1954. The Tamil Nadu Washermen's Federation met with the then Chief Minister K. Kamaraj and submitted a memorandum requesting certain privileges. Finding the response inadequate, the group demanded inclusion in the 'Scheduled Castes' list. The Government rejected this proposal because washermen in the State were not considered 'untouchables' in the strict sense. However, while Kamaraj did not deem it appropriate to include them in the Scheduled Castes list, he noted that there might be other backward

castes in similar situations that could also warrant distinct treatment. Following the review requested in 1954, a list was prepared identifying castes that could be classified as 'Most Backward' within the broader 'Backward Class' category. The Kalelkar Commission endorsed this proposal in its report of 1956.

The Commission designated specific groups as 'Most Backward' and recommended that they be accorded priority over other castes on the Backward Classes list when educational assistance was being allocated. Furthermore, on page 202 of its report, the Kalelkar Commission stated that the needs of all communities falling under the category of backward classes must be taken into account when allocating scholarships. It also noted that while the initial distribution of resources should be based on population ratios across the state, priority must in all cases be given to the 'extremely backward' groups—specifically those included in the list prepared by the Commission itself.¹⁹

Consequently, in 1957 the Government issued Government Order through the Department of Industries, Labour and Co-operation.²⁰ This order established a list of 'Most Backward Classes' to whom educational concessions—previously granted only to 'Scheduled Castes'—would be extended starting from the academic year of 1957-1958.²¹ The Government required further time to classify the specific backward communities falling under this 'Most Backward Classes' category.

The Directors of Harijan Welfare accepted the proposal and submitted a list of groups. However, the Director of Public Instruction reported that determining the degree of backwardness was difficult, as it would likely lead to constant protests and opposition. Nevertheless, the Government considered the proposal by the Director of Harijan Welfare to extend the educational concessions applicable to Scheduled Castes to these classes as well, effective from the academic year of 1957-1958. The government order in question did not establish special quotas (reservations) for appointments or admissions to higher education institutions, nor did it provide the same conditions for accessing scholarships as those granted to Scheduled Castes.²²

In 1957, the Government published a list of 'Most Backward Classes' to implement a quota (affirmative action) system. Revising this list, the Sattanathan Commission in report in 1970 recommended the consideration of 'Most Backward Classes'.²³ It was not put into effect until 1989. By that time, the government under M.Karunanidhi was already reserving 50% of positions in education and employment under the quota system. Of this total, 20% was set aside exclusively for the Most Backward Classes and Denotified Communities (communities formerly classified as criminal tribes but subsequently removed from that status), while the remaining 30% was allocated to 'Other Backward Classes'. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (P.M.K.) headed by S.Ramadoss was not satisfied with the allocation of 20 per cent, but D.M.K. Government reached out to Vanniyars through its own Vanniyar leaders such as Veerapandi Arumugham, Gingee Ramachandran and Durai Murugan to break the myth that the P.M.K. was the only representative of the Vanniyars.²⁴ Thus the Most Backward Classes and Denotified Communities who constituted about 1.22 crores of population got 20 per cent compartmental reservation whereas the Backward Classes who formed about 2.17 crores received 30 per cent reservation.²⁵

Further, on the basis of the Karunanidhi's Cabinet decision, Rs 3 lakh each was given to the families of the thirty persons, who had died in the 1987 Vanniyar reservation agitation, as a solatium, in addition to the announcement that Rs.3000 each would be paid monthly as pension to those families.²⁶

The Vanniar Sangham organization rejected this policy and demanded a 'special quota' of 20% for the Vanniyar Community, claiming that it formed a substantial portion of the State's population but lacked adequate representation in jobs and hence, remained poor.²⁷ The Vanniyar Sangham founded the P.M.K. on 16th July 1989. It emerged as a prominent political party representing the Vanniyar community and recognized the importance of transforming caste identities into political and social identities. Additionally, it believed that gaining a stake in political power was essential for effecting changes in the social structure and the reservation policy.²⁸ In 1988, the Government of Tamil Nadu ordered a comprehensive study to determine the appropriate quota rate within the established limit.²⁹ In 1989, the government issued an official order reserving 20% of available positions for the

Most Backward Classes and the communities within the 50% quota established for Backward Classes. Additionally, the Vanniars were recognized as one of the 'Most Backward Communities' within the list of Backward Classes.³⁰

To conclude, the study has demonstrated that socially and educationally backward communities-such as the Mukkulathor and Vanniyar, which had previously failed to secure their due level of representation in education and employment under the Tamil Nadu Government-were included in the list of the 'Most Backward Classes', thereby securing a 20% share of the positions reserved for Backward Classes. The official 1989 order granting this quota entitlement to those seeking such preferential status contributed significantly to these communities consolidating their socio-political identities. S.Ramadosh, the founder of the P.M.K., continuously pressed for 20 per cent reservation for the Vanniyar community alone.

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