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R.Chinnaswomy, IPS & M. Ramakrishnan

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ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF CASTE CONFLICTS: THE CASE OF NARAIKINARU IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

Caste rivalries, inter-caste conflicts and disputes surfaced in organized forms. Occurrence of such conflicts in the form of ‘Valankai’ (Right Hand) and ‘Idankai’ (Left hand) factions were reported in the works of historians who dealt with social history of the Tamil society. The present paper is an outcome of a case study conducted on caste conflicts in Naraikinaru village of Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. This paper examines the economic implications of caste conflicts which took place in the village.

Keywords: Caste, Leaders, Community, Politics and Unity

Historically, Tamil Nadu is known for the rigidity and complexity of caste system. Each caste group practiced a definite occupation, and rituals and customary practices which fixed their status position in the social hierarchy. For a long time in the history of Tamil Nadu, the various caste groups accepted their status positions as divine sanctions. It does not mean that the traditional Tamil society was absolutely free from caste conflicts. Caste rivalries, inter-caste conflicts and disputes surfaced in organized forms. Occurrence of such conflicts in the form of ‘Valankai’ (Right Hand) and ‘Idankai’ (Left hand) factions were reported in the works of historians who dealt with social history of the Tamil society. Caste conflicts erupted demanding higher status for the respective so called middle ranking, and low ranking caste groups and also for other such reasons as to assert their civil rights and right to performance of rituals of higher caste groups, that is to say the sanskritization processes adopted by low ranking caste groups, were met with stiff resistance, and occasionally, in several places such events triggered violent clashes.

As the middle and low ranking caste groups advanced economically and educationally, together with political consciousness, they became more assertive in securing various rights which had been denied to them. The various caste leaders stood as custodians of their respective caste groups. The occurrence of trivial events, which assumed caste colour, eventually flared up as massive caste conflicts. Of late, in the last few decades, the feeling of caste animosity has penetrated into the young bloods (educated youths). As a result, educational institutions, places of worship, fairs and festivals became places to exhibit inter caste rivalries in an overt manner. Though caste conflicts and intercaste disputes have been reported in all over Tamil Nadu, they took in an ugly turn in southern part of Tamil Nadu, more specifically, in Tirunelveli district. Caste conflicts and violence have caused severe damage to valuable assets besides causing loss of livelihood and precious lives of many people.

In 1995, at the thick of the caste conflagration in Tirunelveli-Thoothukudi districts, a fact-finding team of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties toured the riot hit areas, and observed the estranged relationship existing between two local caste groups as follows: “... caste polarization runs sharp and deep at all levels of society.... It is deeply ingrained in the people that hatred or aversion to the rival communities is passed on from one generation to another.... Even the young ones have been contaminated. And the problem is further complicated by the fact that the various castes patronise and

June 2015
Encourage lumpen elements to an alarming degree... Growing unemployment and impoverishment of the rural sector together provide a fertile breeding ground for criminal gangs. What is especially a matter of concern is the administrative apathy in the face of such a dangerous situation.” This finding, no doubt is relevant even today.

The present paper is an outcome of a case study conducted on caste conflicts in Naraikinaru village of Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. This paper examines the economic implications of caste conflicts which took place in the village.

Naraikinaru a semi barren village, is located seven and half kilo meters away from Kayathar, situated on the Tirunelveli – Madurai main road, and at a equal distance from Vallanadu, situated on the national highways, Tirunelveli – Thoothukudi road. Naraikinaru has a police station of its own now. But until 1997 it remained under Maniyachi police station. As this village is located enroute railways, the people could get train connection to Maniyachi and where from they could go to any part of Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in India. Initially Naidus a land owning caste group lived in this village, and this is recalled by dalits of older generation in the village and also testified by a Perumal temple built by Naidu community the native people. It is informed that even to this date some families of Naidu community visit this temple every year to offer worship. As happened elsewhere, here also, the land owning families had left the village in search of promising prospects elsewhere, and as a result, land seems to have transferred hands from Naidu’s to Nadars. Later when Nadars also moved out of the village, the Thevars with their money, earned chiefly from business, took possession of the land in the village. When the State lifted prohibition, the tenders for toddy and arrack shops were taken by a few Thevars in the neighborhood, who had interest and some experience in the avocation. This is how entry of a couple of Thevar families in to Azhaganeri from Naraikinaru took place.

In Naraikinaru, the Thevars constituted the majority when the other two above said caste groups (Naidus and Nadars) left. In Naraikinaru, there were about two hundred and twenty five Devendrar households and about three hundred Thevar households residing in the village. They (the Thevars) employed Devendrars to work in their fields and gardens. Initially the relationship between these two caste groups seemed to have been cordial. It is said that due to the domineering attitude of Thevars, as landholders, the relationship had become estranged by the beginning of 1990s.

The villagers recall an incident of clash which occurred when a circus show was organized in the village. The Thevars seemed to have insisted on singing their community song, which was opposed by the Devendrars who for their part wanted their community song to be sung. Following this first incident of open confrontation, the relationship between these two communities got worsened. Thereafter, a wordy quarrel that took place, between these two caste groups of the village, while travelling in a bus near Thalaiyuthu, led to ravaging the banana groove of the Thevars by three dalits, Esakkiraj, Vishnu, and Vignesh (name changed). The same accused trio after a week murdered Rasu Thevar (name changed) an ice vendor on 10 July 1993.

Naraikinaru has the advantage of being situated in the midst encircling dalit villages in Vallanadu of Thoothukudi district. It has to be noted here that in Puliamputi police station limit, out of a total population of 15,594, dalits numbered 12,130, while the Thevars were 983 in number. Emboldened by their numerical strength in that area, notably Kodiyanukalam, Puliamputti, Maruthanvazhu,
T. Ayyappanagar, Sevelaperi, Alantha, Singathankurichy, the dalits could retaliate against any form of atrocities committed against them. When violence was unleashed on them, the dalits reacted violently this time. They ransacked the houses of the Thevars and forced them to flee. This was systematically planned and executed from 5 August, 1995.

It was in the above background the police conducted several search raids to track down the rioters and to seize the deadly weapons they carried. The police learnt that the village of Kodiyanakulam was playing a pivotal role in shielding the wanted offenders and also allegedly supplying weapons to the ravaging dalit mob. The district police administration thereupon decided to launch Operation Venus in Kodiyanakulam on 31 August 1995. In Kodiyanakulam and in the adjoining villages such as Naraikinaru, Sevelaperi and Maruthavanazhvu. Yet the murder of Ayyasamy Thevar (84 years) of Maruthavanazhvu occurred on 3 December, 1995, allegedly committed by four dalits shook the entire district, as the one who was murdered happened to be the uncle of a local political leader belonging to CPI, Samikannu (name changed), who throughout his life stood for Dalit - Thevar unity.

The accused in the murder case of Ayyasamy were Sekar, Sudalaimani, Madasamy and Natarajan (name changed). The Thevars, in retaliation, led by Rajendran (name changed) were allegedly said to have set fire to the houses, and hayricks belonging to the Dalits, and killed the goats. Four dalits were seriously injured and one of the injured Natarajan (name changed) later succumbed to his injury got admitted to the Tirunelveli Medical College Hospital. A police force led by the Sub-Inspector of Police, Kadambur, Mr. Kannadassan (name changed), had to resort to firing to chase away and disperse the furious mob.

In the aftermath of Naraikinaru incident, which was not adequately highlighted in the press at that time, the aggrieved dalits, losing faith in police impartiality after Kodiyanakulam incident, met and took a collective decision not to work in the farms and gardens of Thevars for wage, not to borrow money from Thevar moneylenders for interest and not to pay the customary ‘kaval fee’ to the Thevar overlord. This decision when enforced had a terrible impact on Thevars' livelihood. Alwarkarkulam dalits, who were tenants of temple land there, implemented it in letter and spirit and the infuriated Thevars of adjoining villages destroyed their ripened crops and indulged in another spate of violence against dalits. The dalits of Naraikinaru also boldly decided to implement the decision with determination. In Alwarkarkulam the dalits were tenant cultivators. The Thevars were not monetarily affected because they were refused the traditional ‘kaval fee’. Those in money lending business were hit but they soon could seek new clientele to carry on their business. But the Thevars in Naraikinaru of could not carry on who depend on agricultural activities because of shortage of labour.

The entire Thevar community, in consequence, had to move out of the village selling the land to the dalits, by virtue of their hard work had saved money and could use the occasion to buy the major parts of the Thevar land in Naraikinaru. Like the Naidu’s Perumal temple, the Thevars’ Mayandi temple reminds the visitor the legacy Thevars had left in the village. The temple is not forgotten by the migrant Thevar families. They visit the village temple for offering worship. In the past the dominant caste had driven the defying dalits castes out of the villages. It was witnessed even as late as 1997 in Mangapuram, Rajapalayam of Virudhunagar district. Much earlier, about thirty years ago, in the present day Thoothukudi district, the dalits of Manjakambikinaru, when demanded increase in their wage, they
were chased out of the village by the Thevar employers of Melapudur. During the caste riots of 1995 many dalit families left the villages, where they constituted minority anticipating attack from Thevars. But Thevars themselves moving out of the village giving way for dalits is unprecedented. This is because of the emerging unity, solidarity and aggressiveness of the dalits of the neighbouring villages.

This is not like Urudaiyankudiyruppu where Thevars at the time of caste conflict of 1995 constituted minority, and were forced to leave the village. In Naraikinaru the Thevars, even though formed majority and controlled the land, they could not any longer treat the dalits highhandedly. On the other hand, by their social boycott and non-cooperation, the dalits could make the dominant land owning Thevar caste people to move out of the village without any bloodshed through their firm determination and solidarity. Today a major chunk of the displaced Thevars has come to occupy Azhaganeri, Thatchanallur, Thalaiyuthu and other places like Sindupoondurai. Having acquired agricultural land and immovable property, the Thevars are not prepared to take risk in life by letting out their impulses. They want peace and ambience to lead a normal life. This is at least true with the relatively well off and proprted Thevars. But will the caste leaders, whose strategy is to pursue identity politics to retain their vote bank, shy away from using caste as an instrument foe political mobilization.

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