Chapter - II
CHAPTER - II

DEPRESSED CLASSES: CONSCIOUSNESS AND MOBILIZATION

The most socially and politically acceptable name for the most disadvantaged members of Indian society has changed over the years. Outcaste and untouchable have become unacceptable. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new identity among the Depressed Class people who were considered “Outcastes” or “Untouchables”. In the Independent India they called themselves Dalits, a new name they have taken for themselves, and are demanding aggressively their share in the shaping of the destiny of the nation. It is not a mere name or title, in fact; it has become an expression of hope and identity. The modern term “Dalit” has been derived from the Sanskrit root “Dal” which means to crack, open, split and so on. When used as a noun or an adjective, it means burst, split, broken, downtrodden, scattered, crushed or destroyed. However, the present usage of the term goes back to the nineteenth century when Jothirao Phule, the Marathi social reformer and revolutionary used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and broken victims of the Indian caste-ridden society. At the same time, it is believed that this B.R. Ambedkar popularised this usage. The term “Depressed Classes” was used in British circles and also by various reform movements to refer to all kinds of oppressed people including “Untouchables”, without differentiating the basis of religion.


2. In 1931 a special committee was set up to draw a schedule of the castes covered under the depressed classes. In 1932, the British Prime Minister Ramsay Mac Donald replaced the expression “Depressed Classes” with “Scheduled Castes”, to mention those who are kept outside the fourfold varna system and were called avarnas. (Sivadasan, S., ‘Dalit Christians and Human Rights’, Proceedings Volume of Fifth Annual Session of Association of Third World Studies, Trivandrum 2000, p.30.)
The Depressed Class is basically a self-sustaining society. The Depressed Class has a special history. For more than 3500 years, the Hindu religion has treated the Depressed Class people as low and untouchable, and has perpetrated atrocities on them. The Brahmin Manu has codified the philosophy of Hindu religion and enacted the law which promote caste system and placed the Depressed Class people at the bottom line of the society.

Numerical Strength

The Depressed Classes comprised a number of distinct groups, and were condemned as untouchables by the caste-Hindus through centuries. The Depressed Classes were divided into three categories – untouchables, unapproachables and unseeables. They numbered about sixty million out of three hundred million Hindus. Around twenty percent of Hindustan was untouchables. 3

Different Names

The depressed people had different names in different parts of India. They were called Pariays, Pallas, Panchamas, Atishudras, Avannas, Antyajas and Namashudras. Their social disabilities were specific and severe and numerous. Their touch, shadow and even voice were deemed by the caste-Hindus to be polluting. Further, they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste-Hindu. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; obliged to wear a particular type of dress, to eat a particular type of food, to use a particular type of footwear made of wood, and were forced to occupy the dirty, dingy and unhygienic outskirts of village and towns for habitation where they lived in dark, unsanitary and miserable smoky shanties or cottages. The dress of the male consisted of a turban, a staff in the

---

hand, a rough blanket on the shoulder and a piece of lion cloth. The women wore bodices and rough sarees barely reaching the knees.

**Condition in the Past**

The depressed people were denied the use of public wells, and were condemned to drink any filthy water they could find. Their children were not admitted to schools attended by the caste-Hindu children. Though they worshipped the deities of Hindus, observed the same festivals, the Hindu temples were closed to them and barbers and washermen refused to render them service. The caste- Hindus, who fondly threw sugar to ants and reared dogs and other domestic pets and welcomed persons of other religions to their houses, refused look after the pitiable condition of the depressed people or to show them an iota of sympathy. These untouchable Hindus were treated by the caste-Hindu as sub-humans, less than men, worse than beasts. This picture was still true of villages and small towns. Cities had almost overcome this prejudice. Though they were ill-treated, they had to serve in the farms of the caste-Hindus and involved in the domestic works of their masters.

Their miseries do not end with prejudices. As they were illiterate, they were ill-treated, and treated as untouchables for ages. All public services, including police and military forces were closed to them. Naturally they followed hereditary occupations. Some of them were street sweepers, scavengers and shoemakers. While some skinned carcasses, tanned hides and skins, worked in bamboos and cane and mowed grass, others tilled the land as tenants, worked as labourers in fields, and a great number of them subsisted on food or grain given to them as village servants. Thus being deprived of social, religious and civic rights, they had no chance of bettering their conditions; and hence they lived the life of a bygone and dead age, dragging on their miserable existence in insufficient accommodation, unsanitary surroundings and social

---

segregation. In short, they were born in debt and perished in debt. They were born untouchables, they lived as untouchables and they died as untouchables.\(^5\)

**Works of the Christian Missionaries**

The credit of initiating the movement for the elevation of the Depressed Classes during the modern times goes indeed to the Christian missionaries who came to India. The chief aim of the missionaries was proselytization eventhough the social conditions of India gave them full scope for humanitarian work and education among the backward masses as the tools to spread Christianity. However, their yeoman services resulted in arousing Indians to the need for social reform. The missionaries thus became pioneers to commence works against many a social evil. One such evil was untouchability.\(^6\)

They believed in the fatherhood of god and brotherhood of man, they had no faith in untouchability. They mixed freely with the Depressed Classes and tried to improve their lot socially as well as economically. Education being the most effective method for them, they started imparting knowledge to the Depressed Classes and tried to make them conscious of their rights and position in society. The missionaries started schools for boys as well as girls, they took effective action for their social elevation. It was only in schools established and maintained by them that the Depressed Class pupils could get admission and a chance to get education. In fact, they tried to open schools wherever possible for the benefit of the Depressed Classes. They were also pioneers in starting schools for girls and establishing teacher training institutions. Further they were the first agency who tried to provide education to the Depressed Classes in their settlements and developed them as organized communities.\(^7\) The

---


Christian settlements emerged in some of the orthodox Hindu quarters of the past. Missionary work had begun as early as the seventeenth century and with the close of the eighteenth century it had made great progress in South India primarily due to the work of the protestant missionaries from Denmark and Germany, supported by Society for the promotion of Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) of England.

Missionary work in the Madras Presidency was started as early as 1715. Their work covered almost all the regions of the Presidency, particularly North Arcot, South Arcot, Coimbatore, South Canara, Tiruchirappalli, Ramnad, Guntur and Vizagapatinam. There were three missionary schools in 1717 exclusively for the Depressed Class people.8

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the missionaries forced the Government to look into the affairs of the Depressed Classes. The Government through a Government Order granted additional stipend of Rs.2 per month, to the Depressed Class pupils with the aim to promote education among them.9 This order was considered the Magna Carta of the ameliorative measures for Depressed Classes with regard to education.

The elevation of the Depressed Classes was not the work of one, but several organizations belonging to all shades of opinion worked at. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were an era of social and religious reforms. All the social reform movements were aimed at the elevation of the depressed classes.

Works of Social Reform Organizations

Brahmo Samaj was founded by Rajaram Mohan Ray. The Madras branch of the Samaj was founded in 1881. It spread its activities among the Depressed Classes. It started three schools for the poor. The Depressed Class pupils were

---


admitted in these schools without any opposition. The Brahma Samaj also maintained night schools.¹⁰

The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswathi who vehemently condemned the caste system. The Arya Samajists tried to raise the Depressed Classes on a par with the status of the high castes observing the Suddhi ceremony.¹¹

The Buddhists of the nineteenth century came in contact with the Depressed People and as they were opposed to the caste differences, they mixed freely with the Depressed people. In Madras, Iyothee Thassar, an intellectual of the late nineteenth century was the pioneer in spreading rationalism and a leading figure in social, political, literary and philosophical activities which enhanced the status of the Depressed People. He founded the Dravida Mahajana Sangham in 1890 and the Chakya Buddhist Sangam.¹² He started ‘Oru Paisa Tamizhan’ on 19 June and it was renamed as ‘Tamizhan’ on 26 August 1908.¹³ His two associates G.Appadurayar and P.Lakshmi Narasu spread Buddhist ideals among the Depressed People.¹⁴ Under the auspices of Madras branch of

¹⁰ Government of Madras, G.O.1675 and 1676, Home Department, 2 December 1919, pp.101-104.


Maha Bodhi Society the teachings of Buddha were propagated to the Depressed Classes.\textsuperscript{15}

Another organization which took interest in rendering services to the Depressed Classes was the Theosophical Society. The society took this activity soon after the inception. The founder president of the Theosophical Society, Col. H.S. Olcott himself started five schools in Madras collectively known as ‘Olcott Panchama Free Schools’ for the Depressed Class boys and girls.\textsuperscript{16} The schools run by the Theosophical Society received aid from the Government from 1931.

The Servants of India Society was unique in its mission and in its spirit of dedication. It was founded by Gopala Krishna Gokhale on 12 June 1905 at Poona. It rendered service to Depressed Classes, the tribals on the plains and on the hills. The President of the Madras branch of the society V.S Srinivasa Sastri presided over the Depressed Classes Conference in 1912.\textsuperscript{17}

The Ramakrishna Movement made its impact on Depressed Classes by starting one night school for them at Vengudi, Kanchipuram in 1926.

The Madras Social Service League was founded in 1912. It was particularly interested in rendering services to the Depressed Classes with reference to the sanitation, education and promotion of temperance, under the president Mrs. Whitehead.\textsuperscript{18} Thus the socio-religious reform organisations of various nature worked towards the emancipation and promotion of the Depressed Classes.

\textsuperscript{15} Mohan.P.E., \textit{op.cit.}, p.25.


\textsuperscript{17} G.O.912, Public Works and Labour Department, Government of Madras, 1 April 1931.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Labour Unions and Depressed Classes

Labour Unions totally covered all the urban and rural population of the Depressed Classes as they constituted a major portion of the labour force. These labour unions induced them to fight for their rights which were denied to them by the dominant. M.C. Rajah was a labour union leader who worked for the welfare of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu.

Christian Banks and Depressed Castes

From the beginning of the twentieth century several organizations devoted their services to the elevation of the scheduled castes. The Catholic co-operative Credit Society, Tellicherry worked for the general advancement of the Depressed Castes. The Madras Christian Central Co-operative Bank also helped them through the co-operative society.19

Depressed Class Organizations and Integration

The Madras branch of the Depressed Classes Mission Society of India was started in 1909 by the labour of Shinde of Bombay. The workers of the society visited cheris (slums) in Madras city and explained to the residents about their degraded position and helped to inculcate in them self-respect and higher moral principles in life. The society maintained both day and night schools for the Depressed People. The Madras branch of Mangalore Depressed Class Mission Society member S.V.Subramaniya Iyer of Mosur village appealed to Government to grant 41 cents of land for the Depressed Class school in Nammaneri village in North Arcot district.20

The Servants of Untouchables Society was formed on 30 September 1932. Gandhi wanted to rename the society as Harijan Sevak Sangh. Through this organization he popularized the movement for the removal of


untouchability and elevation of the Depressed People to the level of equality with the high caste- Hindus.\textsuperscript{21}

The head office of Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha was at Nungambakkam, Chennai.\textsuperscript{18} A galaxy of its leaders like M.C. Rajah, R. Srinivasan, R. Veerian, J. Sivashanmugam Pillai served actively for the benefit of the Depressed Classes.\textsuperscript{22} It was the most popular and most successful association among the Depressed Classes.

In the legislature council some nominated seats were reserved for the Depressed Classes. They were mostly filled up by the Adi-Dravida and Adi-Andhra communities. The Pallas living in Ramnad district organized a conference of Devendra Kula Mahajana Sabha on 23 April 1924 at Settidiyanpatti, Ramnad district and urged the Government for their representation in the Legislative Council\textsuperscript{23}

Like the Paraiahs and Pallas among the Depressed Classes, the Telugu speaking Arunthatiyas or Chakkliyas of Madras city formed Arundhatiya Mahajana Sabha to fight for their rights.

The Nandanar Mutt also known as Nandanar Mahajana Sabha and popularly known as Nandanar Kalvi Kazagam was started by Sahajananda. He started the Nandanar school at Chidambaram for Depressed Classes in 1916 and 52 acres of waste land was assigned to the school.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{23} Government of Madras, G.O.No.304, Law (Legislative) Department, 21 August 1925

\textsuperscript{24} Government of Madras, G.O.No.1356, Law (Education) Department, 22 June 1928
There are three important historical stages in the involvement of the Government machinery towards the welfare of the scheduled castes. They are

1. The Government machinery and its work prior to the creation of the Labour Department (1919)

2. Creation of the Labour Department and its work and (1919-1947)

3. The creation of the Harijan Welfare Department and its work (1947)

The ameliorative works for the Depressed Classes elevation went on under all the popular Governments. Several national and regional leaders took up the cause of the Depressed Classes and worked for their advancement with more attention and devotion. These leaders came from all walks of life and from all castes and creeds. They were exemplary models and practised what they preached. They pleaded for more educational facilities and better living conditions for the Depressed People.

Reddy Varma of Hydrabad, Pandit Pavan Das of Maharashtra, Babu Jagajivan Ram, etc., They worked well working for creating awareness among the Depressed Classes in the national and regional problems and issues.

**Stand of the Trio**

Three prominent leaders at the time of the struggle for freedom from colonial rulers waged a relentless struggle for the cause of the Depressed Classes. All of them opposed the Congress party in protest against its stand on social issues. They are Jotiba Phule of Maharashtra, E.V.R. of Tamil Nadu and All India Depressed Class Leader B.R. Ambedkar. B.R. Ambedkar raised the slogan ‘Educate, Agitate and Organize’ for the emancipation of the Depressed Classes.

**Rising Dalit Awareness Through Literature**

The literature played a vital role in the creation consciousness among the Depressed People. K.R. Hanumanthans’s a book *Untouchability – A Historical Study upto 1500 AD* is indeed a pioneering work in the realm of history of the Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu. B.R. Ambedkar has dealt with the problem in his book the *Untouchables* but it does not deal with the conditions in the far south. The newspapers and magazines like *Tamizhan* and *Paraian* which were published by Iyothee Thassar and R. Srinivasan respectively, and two books of T.B. Pandian *The Slaves of the Soil of South India, Pandian and the Pariahs* give an account of the actual conditions of the Pariahs and the suggestions and measures taken to elevate them.

---


Depressed Class: An Enquiry by G.A. Natesan published in 1912 gives the progressive ideas of the eminent persons of the day. M.C. Rajah’s book the Oppressed Hindus, and Perumal Pillai’s Adi-Dravida Varalaru (Tamil) viewed Depressed Classes as the original inhabitants of the soil. S.R. Venkataraman’s book, Harijans Through the Ages, and Temple Entry legislations, gives ample information about the civic right problem of the Depressed Classes and how they were tackled.29

In 1891, William Goudie read a paper at the Madras Missionary conference and demanded the attention of the Government towards the disabilities of the Depressed Classes. In 1893, Adam Andrew wrote an article entitled ‘Madras Government and the Pariahs in the Harvest Field.’ In this article he explained their pitiable condition of the Depressed People and lamented over their ignorance, poverty and social degradation, and wanted the stronghand measures of the Government for their complete emancipation.30

Gopala Krishna Gokhale brought out two periodical magazines namely, Servants of India and Social Reformer. Through the editorials and articles of the magazines, appealed to the Government of Madras to render the social reforms concerning the Depressed Classes more effectively. Activities of the various organizations which conducted conferences under the name Depressed Classes Conferences were reported in the newspapers of the time like the Hindu, The Mail etc. The Depressed Class leaders also started several magazines and newspapers to educate their people. Some of them were Suryodayam (1869), Panchamas (1871), Dravida Mitran (1885), Parayan (1893), Illara Ozukkum (1898), Boologavachan (1900), Tamilan (1907), Anror Mitran (1910), Adi Dravidan (1919), Dinabandhu (1924), Adi-

29. Ibid., p. 70.
30. Ibid., p. 77.
**Dravida Mitran** (1939), **Jai Beem** (1940), **Theendathar Thuyaram** (1945), etc.\(^{31}\)

C. Sankaran Nair was the editor for legal journals **Tahsildar, Pleader, Public Prosecutor, Judge** etc. T.M. Nair (1868-1919), was the editor of the **Justice Party** magazine. He sought the co-operation of the Depressed Classes to the Non-Brahmin movement. T.John Rathinam (1846-1942) started a magazine **Dravida Pandian** in 1885, through which he highlighted the sufferings of the Depressed Classes. P.M. Madurai Pillai started a high school for Depressed Classes and gave a portion of his income for the free distribution of books for Depressed Class children. R. Srinivasan (1860-1945), through his a newspaper **Parayan** highlighted the sufferings of the Depressed Classes. In 1925, he wrote a book in Tamil **Alaya Pravesam** wherein he chalked out a programme for the elevation of the Depressed Classes.\(^{32}\)

N. Sivaraj (1892-1964) started an English weekly **Jai Beem** to highlight the news with regard to the Depressed Classes. P. Varadarajulu Naidu was editor of magazines like **Tamilan, Prapancha Mitra** etc. B.S. Murthy wrote a book **Depressed and the Oppressed** in which the author explained the history of reform and sufferings of the Depressed Classes in the past and present.\(^{33}\) Ilam Duravi wrote a book **Manusunka** that described the problems of the Depressed Classes. Gunasekaran wrote a book is **Thalaimuri Kopam** (Angry Through the Ages) \(^{34}\) which provides details about the labour issues of the Depressed Classes in Panrutty. Thalaiyari wrote a book **Enkke Emadu Makkal** (where are our people) which describes the Dalit problems at Pondicherry. K.Daniel wrote many books namely **Adimaikal, Kannal, Govindan, Thannir**

\(^{31}\) Ibid., p. 11.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., p. 46.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., p. 77.

and Panchmar, etc. These books highlight the real pictures of the Depressed Classes. Arivazakan wrote a book Kazisatai which describes about the sweepers’ labour problems. Imaiyam wrote a novel Govari Kazathaikal which also describes the Depressed Classes and many of their problems. Sivakami wrote a book Pazaiyana Kazithal. She gives more details about demerits on the part of the leaders of the Depressed Classes. Bhama wrote a novel Karukku and Sangavi which give details about the Dalits’ history. Poomani’s Piraku describes cobbler life at Karisam Kattu village. Markker’s Yathirai (Journey) highlights the condition of the Christian converts of the Depressed Classes. Arukkan’s Jathi Payithiyam, (Madness of Caste) a novel, describes the caste problem. K.A. Gunasekaran’s drama is Pali Addukal (Victimized Lambs). K. Subhaiha’s music songs of Thittupaduma, (Can touch Pollute) Cherical Pootha Malarkal, (Flowers Blossmed in the Quarters of the Depressed Classes), highlights the condition of the Depressed People in the recent past. The Dalit ‘Kaana’ songs specialists Pooliyanthoppu Palani, Aairam Villakku Selvam, Viyasarbadi Ullaganthan and others. created awareness among the Depressed Classes. The Government of the Madras Presidency was the first Provincial Government in India to undertake the ameliorative works for the Depressed Classes. Their elevation slowly took shape under the various Governments- the British, the Justice Party and the Congress. All these parties have worked for the elevation of Depressed Classes by introducing many welfare schemes and have tried to bring them to the level of the other people in society.

Towards Social Elevation

Unlike the other communities, the Depressed Classes were economically very backward. Government and other agencies worked to improve their economic condition, started co-


operative societies, and provided lands, house sites, drinking water facilities, burial grounds and pathways. They also tried to get them permanently employed through the policy of reservation of seats. As a result of all these, it was expected that their economic condition would be improved and they would play their rightful role in society. The Government also came forward to improve their condition in the field of education by offering special inducements in the shape of fee and age concessions, scholarships, midday meals, relaxation of other rules which are prevalent in educational institutions.

The national and regional leaders tried to secure the civil rights of the Depressed Classes through the legislative measures. All these steps and measures mobilised the depressed people, consolidated their position and integrated them to face the challenges in all forms. The growth of the newspapers, as well as many publications made the Depressed people to be aware of the political trends in the national and regional level. The consciousness and mobilization of the Depressed Classes created awareness. Consequently, their position began to change.

Legislative measures will be published.