

INTRODUCTION



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The Depressed Classes who constitute approximately 18% of the total population of India, peculiarly enough, are treated as social untouchables for over a period of two thousand years. They are known by different names at different stages. They were called Panchamas, Paraiyas, Pallas, Chakkilians, Tiyas, Mādigas, Mālas, Holeyas, Untouchables, Ādi-Dravidas, Ādi-Andhras, Ādi-Karnatakas, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes etc., and they are at the lowest in the hierarchy of social classes of the community.

Since the advent of Mahatma Gandhi who espoused the cause of these people, they are called generally 'Harijans'.

These people who constitute 1/5th of the Indian population were credited, for no fault of theirs and unfortunately with pollutary power which has no parallel in any other part of the earth. The touch or shadow, or even the voice of these people was regarded as polluting.

As a consequence, they were destined to live in perpetual squalor, filth, misery, disease, poverty and ignorance. They were totally segregated from the rest of the society and even the elementary amenities were denied to them. For fear of oppression, they, for a long time, did not raise their voice in protest. Even when a feeble voice of agony or protest was sounded, it went unheeded by those in the higher strata of society. Until the dawn of the modern era in India, neither the civic leadership nor the government came forward to do anything for the betterment of the life of the Depressed Classes. Though these classes comprised the bulk of the toiling multitude, the status assigned to them was sub-human by all standards. By the sweat of their brow, the Depressed Classes were filling the granaries of their masters, while hunger haunted them till they breathed their last. Words are inadequate to describe their plight. There was a diabolical design in keeping the Depressed Classes in eternal servitude. It was advantageous for the so called upper classes to keep them in eternal bondage.

This aroused the sympathy of many reformers and saints in India. But mere sympathy or a word of

consolation could not, in any way, improve their lot. There has been no dearth of sermonizing on the evils of untouchability. But they have been of no avail. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar observes :

"There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the Depressed Classes, but everyone of them has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone. But the untouchables have remained as untouchables."1

This thesis highlights the sorry state of affairs of the Depressed Classes in the Composite State of Madras. An attempt has been made to probe into the origin of untouchability and the Depressed Classes in the then Madras Presidency. It must be pointed out that none in particular has till date attempted a social history of the Tamil Region with emphasis on the evils of casteism and hence the problem of the Depressed Classes has not received due attention. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has dealt exclusively and exhaustively with the problem of the Depressed Classes in his work, "The Untouchables." He has not dealt with particularly the condition of the Depressed Classes in the extreme South of India. Dr. K.R. Hanumanthan, in his unpublished thesis on "Untouchability in Tamilagam" (1972),



submitted to the University of Madras, covers the ancient and medieval periods upto 1500 A.D. This is more a historical analysis of the origin and growth of the problem of untouchability and not an analytical work on untouchables. Another research work on the problem of untouchability is "Political Implications of Untouchability" (1973) by Dr. A.G. Jeevaratnam. He has treated the problem of untouchability in a general way covering the entire country. This cannot be taken as a critical socio-political study of untouchables and untouchability. Dr. A.M. Rajasekhariah, in his work, "B.R. Ambedkar - The Politics of Emancipation" (1971), deals admirably with the life and mission of Dr. Ambedkar to uplift his own people. Scores of other treatise have been produced about Dr. Ambedkar and the plight of the untouchables in India. But none has hitherto paid any particular attention to the problem of untouchability in the Presidency of Madras. Dr. S. Saraswathi, in her work, "Minorities in Madras State" (1974), makes a passing reference to the condition of the backward classes and touches upon slightly the political role of the fifth varna. E.F. Irschick, in his work - "Politics and Social Conflict in South India" (1969) - deals mainly with the non-Brāhmin movement and has not paid any particular

attention to the problem of the Depressed Classes. Christopher J. Baker too in his book, "The Politics of South India" (1976), has been more concerned with the non-Brahmin movement and has not dealt with the question of the Depressed Classes as such. D.J. Arnold, in his research work, "Nationalism and Regional Politics : Tamilnadu" (1973), has made certain superficial references only to the Depressed Classes. "The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India" (1977), a research work by Dr.S. Manickam deals mainly with the work of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries in the Trichy and Thanjavur areas and it touches upon the social and economic conditions of the Depressed Classes in these areas and the impact of education and conversion to Christianity.

It is fervently hoped that the present work could provide the much needed insight into the problem of the Depressed Classes and prove to be a stimuli, both to the Government and to the Depressed Classes, in realising their respective positions in relation to the problem. The researcher has undertaken the onerous task of providing satisfactory answers to many important and pertinent

questions raised about the Depressed Classes. When and how did untouchability originate in the Tamil Region? What were the disabilities to which the Depressed Classes have been subjected? When and by whom were the ameliorative steps were undertaken to alleviate the hardships of the Depressed Classes? What, in general, has been the outcome of the ameliorative measures thus far undertaken? What was the condition of the Depressed Classes at the time of transfer of power? In what way could the lot of the Depressed Classes be still improved? It is felt that this study will have far-reaching consequences in that it may serve as a guide for future course of action to be pursued. It may also serve as an eye-opener to the Depressed Classes themselves.

This study is a socio-political one. The social and political disabilities of the Depressed Classes are examined at length over a period of time. In the section dealing with ameliorative measures, the researcher has analysed critically the measures set afoot by communal organizations, missionaries, and the government to uplift the downtrodden Depressed Classes. The effects of these measures also have been summed up.

This study covers a period of about four decades from 1909; but at the same time it has taken into account the developments even after independence. It starts with the year the Morley-Minto Reforms were put into effect and as a result of which separate electorates were granted to the Muslim, Sikhs, Christians and Europeans. This in turn, gave phillip to the demand of the Depressed Classes for political rights similar to these granted to other minorities.

The area covered by this study is the erstwhile composite State of Madras. Prior to independence, the Presidency of Madras was one of the largest provinces of British India, extending over an area of 1,41,000 square miles, with a population of forty-four millions. Bounded by the sea on the east, south, and west, its eastern and western coastline extended to about 1,700 miles. The eastern coastline which started from lake Chilka on the Coromandel Coast ran southwards to Cape Comorin, the southern-most tip of the Indian Peninsula. From this point, the western coastline ran northwards and terminated at the southern boundaries of North Kanara District on the Malabar Coast. From here, the land boundary ran in a

north-eastern direction along the borders of the Presidency of Bombay, the Princely States of Mysore and Hyderabad and the Central Provinces until it touched the frontier of Bengal, when the boundary turned east to lake Chilka. Within these geographical limits, the British Districts of Madras Presidency and the five native States of Travancore, Cochin, Pudukkottai, Banganapalle and Sandur were included.

The sprawling Presidency of Madras can be divided on a linguistic basis into four distinct regions - Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kanarese (Kannada). Andhra Dēsa or the Telugu country, which lay in the Northern part of the Presidency, comprised the preponderantly Telugu-speaking districts of Vizagapatnam, Godavari, Krishna, Guntur, Kurnool, Bellary, Anantapur, Cuddapah and Nellore. To the South lay Tamilnadu comprising the districts of Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Salem, Coimbatore, Trichinopoly, Thanjavur, Madura, Ramnad and Tinnevely. The Kanarese and the Malayalam districts of South Canara and Malabar respectively are located on the West coast. In 1901, there were twenty-two administrative districts in the Presidency of Madras. This number

increased to twenty-five by the year 1911 (vide Table-I). The Presidency of Madras was "bigger than any other Indian Province except Burma and nearly five times bigger than Scotland with a population nearly ten times bigger, speaking seven principal languages."² Though there were seventy languages in the Presidency, only six of them were fertile and developed and they were Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kanarese, Oriya and English. Tamil was in vogue in all the Tamil districts of the Presidency while Telugu, Malayalam, Kanarese and Oriya were spoken in the Telugu district, Malabar, South Canara, Bellary and Ganjam respectively. Since the Depressed Classes were spread all over the Presidency, they spoken the languages of the area of their habitation. But strangely enough they all shared without any distinction poverty and backwardness.

In 1936, the Government had recognised, for purposes of franchise, eighty-six castes as depressed. Among these castes, none was better off than the other. In social and political backwardness, all these castes were on the same level. For purposes of this study, no particular caste from among the Depressed Classes has been taken. References have been made, whenever necessary, to particular castes.

While alluding to particular castes, care has been taken to choose them on the basis of their population (Table-II).

Casteism and its attendant evil, untouchability, was a problem of first magnitude in the Presidency of Madras. Though the Depressed Classes comprised about one-fifth of the total population at the turn of the century, they were totally denied the fruits of their labour and subjected to inhuman treatment at the hands of the Brāhmins and the non-Brāhmin caste Hindus. The Tamil and Telugu Brāhmins, who together comprised only 3.2 per cent of the total population of the Presidency, occupied a great majority of administrative and educational positions then open to Indians. They regarded themselves as the sole repositories of learning and the custodians of the Hindu faith.

Below the Brāhmins immediately next were the non-Brāhmin group of caste Hindus who played a domineering role in the society. The most important among these were the Tamil Vellālas who were of peasant stock. They formed an important segment of the rural population and were also employed under the government as village revenue collectors (Karnams). Some were engaged in trade and commerce. In

certain areas of the Presidency, the Vellālas were more orthodox than the Brāhmins. The Vellālas were very widely diffused throughout the Tamil region.

The Reddis or Kāpus were also a peasant sub-caste similar to the Vellālas. The Reddis were in strength in the Rayalaseema region. These people, along with the Kammās, another major cultivating group, migrated into the Tamil region during the hegemony of the Vijayanagar Kings. The Vēlamās, regarded as offshoots of the Kāpus, were large land-owners in the littoral north of Madras City. Another Telugu caste which probably had connections with the Kāpus was the Balaija Nāidus. These Nāidus were classified as traders, a majority of them were in fact cultivators. The Nāyaks of Madura and Thanjavur were Balaija Nāidus. Another important non-Brāhmin Group was that of the Malayalam-speaking Nāirs who came from the States of Travancore and Cochin and from the Malabar District of the Presidency. The Nāirs, well educated and professionally trained, were second only to the Brāhmins in the administrative and educational set-up of the Presidency.

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These non-Brāhmin Hindu castes, together with the Brāhmins, comprised about four-fifths of the total population of the Presidency of Madras. The remainder were the untouchables or the Depressed Classes. Though the Depressed Classes were totally segregated from the rest of society, they played an important part in the rural life of the Presidency. The most important among the Tamil-speaking Depressed Classes were the Paraiyas, Chakkilians and Pallas. The two leading Telugu-speaking Depressed Classes were the Mālas and the Mādigas. Among the Malayalam-speaking untouchables, notable were the Pulaiyas, Nāyadis, and Ēzhavas. Important among the Kanarese-speaking Depressed Classes were the Holiyas.

Sources :

The sources from which the material has been collected for the thesis were mainly literary works and Government records. To trace the early history of the Depressed Classes, inscriptional material has also been helpful. The published South Indian Inscriptions, Annual Reports on South Indian Epigraphy, Epigraphia Carnatica, Travancore Archaeological Series, Journal of the Bombay

Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Hyderabad Archaeological Series were helpful in providing material concerning the condition of the Depressed Classes and the magnitude of untouchability during the medieval period.

There is plenty of material regarding the caste system in the literature of the Tamils. The Caṅkam Classics (so-called because they are said to have been composed by a galaxy of poets belonging to Tamil Caṅkam or Association and collected in the form of anthologies by latest poets under the patronage of Pandyan Kings), provide rich material to understand the nature of untouchability during the age of the Caṅkam (usually considered to cover the first three or five centuries A.D.). Tolkāppiam, the earliest grammar of the Tamil language, also depicts the condition of the Depressed Classes in the ancient Tamil society. The classics of the Caṅkam age do not contain direct references to the problem of untouchability. From this, it has been possible to infer that the evil of untouchability was not present in the ancient Tamil society and that it was a later accretion.

Medieval Tamil literature is mainly religious in

character. The works of this period recognise the existence of untouchability but do not support it. The Ālvārs (Vaishnavite saints) and Nāyanmārs (Saivite saints), in their hymns, dream and sing about a casteless society. In the works of the Siddhas (who, by severe austerities, have succeeded in controlling the functioning of their bodies and minds) of the medieval period, there is outright condemnation of the caste system and untouchability.

Recent works on untouchability have been few and far between. Dr. Ambedkar's "The Untouchables" may be regarded as an original thesis on the subject. But Dr. Ambedkar's theories are applicable to the North and not so much to the South. Other works of Dr. Ambedkar which are of use are : 'Annihilation of Caste' (1936), "Mr. Gandhi and Emancipation of the Untouchables" (1942), "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables" (1945), "Communal Deadlock and a Way to Solve it" (1945), and "States and Minorities" (1947). The chapter on "Exterior Castes" in "Castes in India" by Hutton deals with the origin of the untouchables in South India. Hutton opines that the caste system and untouchability in India are the products of the mingling of Āryan and



pre-Āryan social institutions. Thurston's seven volumes on "Castes and Tribes of South India" describe the condition of the untouchables during the modern period. The District Manuals and the Census Reports, periodically published by the Government of Madras during the British days, give, in a nutshell, the origin and growth of the high as well as the low castes of the Presidency.

The Depressed Classes themselves had their own associations and publications to foster unity among themselves and to focus attention on their problems and conditions. Some of their Journals were : Sūriyodayan (1869), Pañchaman (1891), Makāvikatatoothan (1873), Sugirdavāsani (1877), Boolōga Vyāsan (1900), Dravida Kōgilam (1907), Tamizhan (1907), Ānrar Mitran (1910), Ādi-Dravida Mitran (1939), Puttuier (1940). and Jai Beem (1940). Many of these journals enjoyed wide circulation. Apart from these, certain notable publications of the leaders of the Depressed Classes were extremely helpful to gauge the depth of the problem of untouchability. Mention, in this connection, may be made of 'The Oppressed Hindus' by M.C.Rajah and 'The History of the Adi-Dravidas' and 'The Life, Select Writings and

Speeches of Rao Bahadur M.C. Rajah, M.L.A.' by J.

Sivashanmugam Pillai proved to be a mine of information on the efforts of the leaders of the Depressed Classes to better the life of their brethren. The biographies of N.Sivaraj, R.Srinivasan, P.V.Subramaniam and other leaders of the Depressed Classes proved to be helpful to understand the intensity of the misery to which the Depressed Classes had been subjected by the caste Hindus; and the valiant efforts made by these unfortunate beings to rise up to the level of ordinary human beings.

Reports on the Administration of the Madras Presidency from 1857 to 1957, the Proceedings of the Madras Legislative Council since 1920, and the Madras Legislative Assembly debates were extremely valuable in assessing the work done by the Government to better the lot of the Depressed Classes. The different Census Reports were helpful in gathering statistics regarding the Depressed Classes. Reports of the various Committees and Commissions appointed by the Government were of considerable use and value. Reports of the All India Congress Committee and the Justice Party proved useful to study the part played by the political leadership to uplift the downtrodden Depressed Classes.

'Kudi Arasu', 'Justice', 'Dravidian', 'Madras Mail', 'The Hindu', 'Swadesamitran' and other local news papers were helpful to the researcher to follow closely the lay-to-day developments with regard to the ameliorative measures aimed at uplifting the Depressed Classes. The late J. Sivashanmugam Pillai, a former distinguished Speaker of the Legislative Assembly from 1946 to 1955 and a Leader of the Depressed Classes in the Presidency was extremely helpful to the researcher by personally clarifying many a point during the course of an interview. Mrs. Jōthi Vencatachellum, the present Governor of Kerala, Mr. P. Kakkan, Ex-Minister of Tamilnadu, Dr. (Mrs.) Sathyavanimuthu, Ex-Minister of Tamilnadu, and Mr. B. Basavalingappa, Minister of Karnataka obliged the researcher by providing first-hand information regarding the Depressed Classes and this was helpful in clarifying many a point.

Viewed from the angle of the problem undertaken for this study, the source materials have been scarce. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, a serious and sincere attempt has been made to evaluate the available material critically and to draw conclusions therefrom. In the absence of direct evidence, it has been necessary to make inferences

with the aid of purposeful imagination in certain respects. As Dr. Ambedkar puts it, "without trained imagination, no scientific enquiry can be fruitful and hypothesis is the very soul of science."³

This study is divided into nine chapters and in each one of them a particular phase of the problem of the Depressed Classes is examined.

After outlining the social, religious, economic, educational and political disabilities suffered by the Depressed Classes, the researcher proceeds to an examination of the ameliorative measures set afoot by the Christian Missionaries, the Buddhists, the Hindu Reformers and the communal organizations like the Ādi-Dravida Mahājana Sabha, established by the Depressed Classes themselves. The initial steps taken by the Government to set matters right with regard to the Depressed Classes are also studied.

Then the researcher draws attention to the further deterioration in the condition of the Depressed Classes in spite of the ameliorative measures initiated earlier. The emergence of the non-Brāhmin movement and forces to contain

the spread of Brāhminism also engaged the attention of the researcher. The demand for a human and humane treatment voiced by the leaders of the Depressed Classes on the floor of the legislature and the memoranda and representations made on behalf of the Depressed Classes have been fully analysed. The consequential grant of concessions by the Government in education, jobs and political representation have been listed after a critical review. The work of the Simon Commission, the outcome of the Round Table Conferences, the Poona Pact, and the Government of India Act of 1935 have been critically analysed. The role played by the Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr.B.R.Ambedkar in the cause of the Depressed Classes has also been essayed. The thesis ends with an appraisal of the present trends and the conclusions of the researcher wherein he raises certain hypotheses for future course of action.

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References

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2. Lady Pentland, The Right Honourable John Sinclair Lord Pentland, G.C.S.I., London, 1918, p.180.
3. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, The Untouchables, Preface, p.VII.

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