

CHAPTER - I

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
DEPRESSED CLASSES

CHAPTER - I
ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE
DEPRESSED CLASSES

The origin of the Depressed Classes is shrouded in mystery. There are several conflicting theories regarding the origin of the Depressed Classes, but there is no conclusive evidence as to pinpoint the origin of the Depressed Classes. Most of the theories are based on circumstantial evidences and surmises.

It could be said that the Depressed Classes were of Pre-Dravidian, or Dravidian origin, or Aryan origin. Though there is disagreement among scholars in identifying the Depressed Classes with any one of these three groups, yet there is some agreement about the primitive nature of the Depressed Classes.

Pre-Dravidian Origin :

It is suggested by many scholars that the Depressed Classes or the Untouchables could have been

the aboriginal pre-Dravidian people of India who were conquered by the Dravidians or Aryans and relegated to a low status. Mr. Stanley Rice says that the Untouchables of South India :

"were not the races conquered by the Aryans; the Paraiyas belonged to the aborigines who were conquered by the Dravidians and being of a different race they were not admitted into the totem of similar clans with which marriage is always intimately connected ... Thus the Dravidians applied to the Paraiyas the same test which the Aryans assumed to have applied to the conquered inhabitants. They reduced them to the position of serfs and assigned to them duties which it was thought beneath their own dignity to perform."¹

Bishop Caldwell too holds similar views. He remarks :

"Nevertheless, the supposition that they belong to a different race, that they descended from the true aborigines of the country - a race older than the Dravidians themselves - and that they were reduced by the first Dravidians to servitude is not destitute of probability."²

To authenticate his views, Caldwell mentions that the Canarese Paraiyas were once an independent people. He says that the Tamil Paraiyas were once a distinguished caste and mentions the special privileges offered to them during religious festivals. To support his argument that

the Depressed Classes or Untouchables were of pre-Dravidian origin Bishop Caldwell mentions that the national name Tamilians, Malayalis, Kannadigas, etc., were withheld from them and conferred exclusively on higher castes.

"Tamilian means neither a Brāhmana, nor a Paraiya but a Dravidian, a Sūdra. As the lower castes are never denoted by this national name, it would seem to imply that they do not belong to the nation but belong to a different race like Tamil-speaking Brāhmīns and Muhammadans."³

Mr. Ghurye is also of the view that the pre-Dravidians probably inhabited South India before the coming of the Dravidians.⁴ Pressed on by waves of immigrants, some of the pre-Dravidians took shelter in the jungles of South India and some chose to remain in the plains. The latter were enslaved and assigned menial functions. The pre-Dravidians were segregated as Untouchables by the Dravidians.

The successive Āryan invaders conquered and subjugated the indigenous people. "In the process of social interaction between the conquerors and the conquered, a portion of the conquered indigenous population was incorporated into the Āryan fold." They were

called the Sūdras. "The most backward and Depressed section of the incorporated population, it appears, constituted the hereditary caste of Untouchables."⁵ Prof. Oppert is of the view that the Bharatas mentioned in the Rig Vēda were of non-Āryan origin who gradually gained access to the Āryan society and were divided into two branches, namely the Kurus and Pancālas. Those Bharatas who could not be accommodated into the Āryan society divided themselves into Candians and Dravidians. Many of the Depressed Classes of Northern India belong to the Candian section of the Bharatas and many of the Depressed Classes in the South are of the Dravidian stock.⁶ The position of the Candālas among the Candians is similar to that of the Paraiyas among the Dravidians. This is also indicated by the name of Candālas which resembles these of Kandalas, Kands, and Gōuda.⁷ Prof. Oppert is of the opinion that all the tribes whose names contain the letter 'r', such as Nhar, Nar, and Mahar, are representatives of the first and oldest stratum of the Dravidian race and that the descendants of the Malla or Palla are those of the second stage from which the other groups of the present Dravidian population have gradually evolved.⁸ Mr. Dutt expresses the view that the Paraiyas



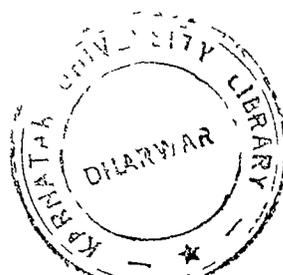
belonged to a pre-Dravidian stock, probably Munda MonKhamer race who had remained un-absorbed by the Dravidians and were treated as Paraiyas even by the latter.⁹ Ghurye says, "the very wide, though discontinuous, distribution of Candāla and Dom, two groups which undoubtedly appear to have been ethnic in origin, creates a presumption in favour of the theory that some of the untouchable groups must have originated in the conquest of the natives by the incoming Āryans."¹⁰

Dravidian Origin :

The Dravidian origin of the Depressed Classes is stressed by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar. He is of the opinion that the Dravidian or Nāgā tribes-men, due to incessant warfare among themselves, were reduced to the status of 'broken men' and hence had to live outside villages.¹¹ The difference between the 'broken men' and those living in the villages was that they belonged to different tribes and there was no question of untouchability.¹² Dr.Ambedkar says that the Dāsas were the same as Nāgas and the Nāgas were the same as Dravidians. There were only two races

then in India, the Āryans and the Nāgas.¹³ The Nāgas or Dravidians who inhabited India were very ancient and had a distinct culture. They were a seafaring tribe in the South and merged with the Ćeras.¹⁴ Tamil was their language and it was spoken from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.¹⁵ While the Nāgas of the North became Aryanised, those in the South were not. "Nāga was a racial or cultural name and Dravida was their linguistic name."¹⁶

Dr. Ambedkar's views are not supported by any historical evidence. His assumption is that before the coming of the Āryans, people of India belonged to only one race, the Nāga or Dravidian race, which was highly civilised and the uncivilised or 'broken men' who were nomads, became the Untouchables or the Depressed Classes. Father Heras considers the Dravidian civilization as the background of the Āryan civilization. His view is that the Dravidian civilization must have contained at least the rudiments of the caste system which was copied by the Āryans later.¹⁷ Prof. Sundaram Pillai, a great Tamil scholar, is of the view that the Dravidians or the Tamils once inhabited the whole of the Indian sub-continent and that the Āryan civilization was "literally the Dravidian



civilization at bottom."¹⁸ Bishop Caldwell too comes to the same conclusion basing his views on the presence of a large number of Dravidian words in Sanskrit.¹⁹

But other scholars hold different views. Mr. Hutton is of the views²⁰ that the Austro-Asiatic group of languages, to which Munda and other languages belong, was widespread in the world and that early Sanskrit was influenced by Munda Monkhmer languages rather than by Dravidian. Prof. Furer Haimendorf says that the "Dravidians at no time spread over a wider area than we find in historical times."²¹ It should be noted that Sanskrit and other North Indian languages differ considerably from the Dravidian languages in their grammar, orthography, prosody, syntax and style. The culture of the Tamilians as revealed in their early literary works is different from that of the Āryans.²² The paucity of relevant information renders it difficult to state conclusively that the Dravidians were spread throughout India before the coming of the Āryans. It may be said the Dravidians were different from the Āryans and that they came to the South by the sea route and not by land across the Vindhya mountains. Dr. Speech says that the

Dravidians came to India from the Mediterranean countries by sea.²³ Prof. Nilakanta Sastri considers the invasion of North India by the Āryans and the consequent displacement of the Dravidians from the North to the South, as a myth.²⁴ It may be said that a parallel culture to those of the Āryans in the North had been evolving in the South and later, by mutual influence, a synthetic culture was evolved. The Dāsas of Northern India, who were conquered by the Āryans, do not seem to be the same as the Āryans of the South. Ghosh surmises that "the Dāhas or, the Margin intelligentsia who got dislodged and displaced from their homes and from their ruling position by another wave of northern Āryan invaders might have been the ancestors of the Vedic Āryans."²⁵ But this theory loses its credibility because the Iranians settled in Iran only after the Āryans had settled in India. Hence, the claim of Dr. Ambedkar that the Dāsas were the same as Dāhas and that the Dahas were the same as Nāgas or Dravidians seems to lose its ground. It must be mentioned, however, that many of the Dāsas were permitted to enter the Sūdra Varna and those who refused to join the Vedic Āryans were called as Vrātyās and were admitted into the Vedic society later after a ceremony called Vrātyāstoma.²⁶

This was done only in the case of those Vrātyās who desired to join the Vēdic society. In course of time, Vrātyāstoma was discontinued and the Dāsas and other tribes were segregated as Untouchables. The Untouchables of North India and those in South India seem to have originated from different roots. Hence, it is not proper to consider all the Untouchables of India as the descendants of Dravidians.

Āryan Origin :

It is assumed that the Sūdras of the four Varnas were Āryans and that the Depressed Classes were a part of the Sūdra-Varna and hence they were also Āryans. This is hinted at by Dr. R.S. Sharma.²⁷ He calls the Untouchables or the Depressed Classes as inferior Sūdras.²⁸ In the opinion of Dr. Sharma, the inferior Sūdras, who were the earliest Āryans, were suppressed into slavery by a latter wave of Āryan invaders. These Sūdras were "the defeated and dispossessed section of the Āryans and Āryan tribes."²⁹ From this it follows that the Depressed Classes consisted of Āryan and non-Āryan tribes. They

were not pure Āryans. It may be surmised that in the beginning the conquered and enslaved indigenous tribes were demarcated as Depressed Classes, and in course of time those Āryans who transgressed caste rules or committed certain types of crimes were also segregated as Depressed Classes.

Origin of Segregation :

Segregation of people into touchables and Untouchables based on the community to which they belonged has been in vogue in the Hindu society for many centuries. This has been the result of the "Social nausea" of one group against another. It is difficult to fix the date of origin of untouchability in India. It is only possible, from available data, to deduce the probable date of its origin.

Of the earliest records that are available for analysis, mention must be made of the Rig Vēda, the earliest of the Vēdas. Though mention is made in the Rig Vēda about the conflict between two groups, Āryan and Dāsa or Dasyu, there is no reference to rigid caste

system in it. It seems that the priests and chieftains of the defeated Dāsas were given similar status to that of the Āryan priests and chieftains.

Some of the Rishis or seers of the Dāsas such as Kanwa³⁰ and Dirghatamas³¹ are described as Krishna Rishis or black seers. It is said that Brāhmin priests received gifts from Balbūtha and Taruksha, who were Dāsa chieftains.³² Though the Rig Vēda mentions groups like Carmanna (Tanner) and Vapa (Barber), they are not mentioned as Untouchables.³³ Reference to the four Varnas, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sūdra is found only once in the hymn called Purushasūkta.³⁴ They are mentioned here as the four parts of the body of Virāt Purusha. This cannot be taken as a fact because this hymn appears to be a late interpolation since it speaks of the Yajur and Sāma Vēdas which were composed later than the Rig Vēda.³⁵ The Rig Vēda mentions the Brāhmins only as sages who composed holy hymns and not as hereditary priests.³⁶ Similarly, the word Kshatriya, which is used to indicate those who are strong, is also applied to the gods.³⁷ During the Rig Vēdic period there seems to have been no groups based on occupation.

It is said that in a particular family the father was a physician, the mother a grinder of corn, and the son a composer of hymns. Though there were different professions, they were not based on communities and no profession seems to have been hereditary.

It was during the later Vedic period that the Aryan society came to be divided on occupational lines and consequently the four-class system came into existence. Those whose vocation was priesthood came to be designated as Brāhmins, those whose speciality was the martial arts came to be known as Kshatriyas, those who were engaged in commerce were called Vaisyas, and those who performed the menial tasks were denoted as Sūdras.³⁸ But the society was not rigid. There was enough intermingling of groups. In the Yajur Vēda, mention is made of Pancajana in which, in addition to the already mentioned four Varnas, one more, called Nishada, is mentioned as the fifth Varna.³⁹ Later, the Nishādas came to be regarded as Untouchables. Several references are there in the Brāhmanas and Upanishads to prove that there was much intermingling of groups during this period. Even in the Epic period, intermingling of

groups was the order of the day. Rāma is said to have befriended Guha, a boatman, or Kaiivarta and embraced him. But in some legends mentioned in Bālakānda and Uṭṭarakānda, a dark-skinned, short-haired, rough bodied people bedecked with iron ornaments are spoken of as Candālas, a low class people.⁴⁰

Beginnings of untouchability are to be seen in the period of Dharmasāstras and Dharmasutras (600 - 300 B.C.).⁴¹ It is during this period that the Candālas are singled out as unfit for social intercourse. Vasishtha, Bandhāyana and Āpastamba equate Candālas with impure objects and creatures and prescribe a purificatory bath for touching a Candāla.⁴² Āpastamba says, "as it is sinful to touch a Candāla (it is also sinful) to speak to him or to look at him (the penance) for touching him is a bath submerging the whole body; for speaking to him to speak to a Brāhmin; for looking at him to look at the lights (of heaven)."⁴³ The Dharmasūtras apply the term asprisya to the Candālas.⁴⁴ A person who becomes a Candāla by his conduct could be readmitted into the Āryan society after an expiatory ceremony. But a Candāla by birth (Janma Candāla) cannot be done so.⁴⁵

The Jātakas of the Buddhists also abound with instances where Candālas are described as despicable people. It is said that the daughter of a merchant washed her eyes with scented water for having seen two Candālas.⁴⁶ Ficks, the historian, says that the Candālas lived outside the town or village and wore dirty garments and spoke a peculiar language. He says that the Pukhasas (flower gatherers) and Nishādas were equally despised as the Candālas.⁴⁷

Since the early Jātakas are also assigned the same date as the Dharmasāstras, that is, 600 - 300 B.C., it may be surmised that during the pre-Mauryan period people like the Candālas, Pukhasas and Nishādas were regarded as outcastes and Untouchables. Segregation of these people from the rest of the society is hinted at by Pānini who lived during the 5th Century B.C.⁴⁸ Patanjali is of the view that the very touch of these people permanently defiled the bronze vessels of the Brāhmins.⁴⁹ While these people are listed as Niravasitas (those who are outside the Āryan society), the other Sūdras are termed as Aniravasitas (those not expelled from the community of higher classes).

During the Mauryan period the Candālas were not included in the Sūdra Varna. This is evident from the writings of Kauṭilya who calls Candālas as Antāvasāyins and prescribes a fine of five hundred panams (coins) for a Candāla who touches an Āryan woman.

By the time of Manu, who, according to Buhler,⁵⁰ lived during the second century A.D., the deterioration in the social position of the Candālas had reached the bottom of the abyss. The possibility of the lower classes moving up in the social ladder and entering the Āryan society was forbidden forever. He said that there are only four Varnas and there can be no fifth Varna.⁵¹ Manu calls the low classes as Antyās and Bahyās.⁵² It is said that if a Brāhmin took food from a Candāla or if had intercourse with a Candāla woman, he would lose his caste.⁵³ The Candālas, regarded as the lowest of humans, were equated with pigs, dogs, cocks and crows.⁵⁴ Their touch was impure and imparted pollution which could be removed only by a purificatory bath.⁵⁵ They were to take their food from broken vessels.⁵⁶ They had to wear ornaments made of iron and wear the clothes of the dead.⁵⁷ Their occupations were execution of criminals, disposal of unclaimed dead bodies, and the like.⁵⁸ These

disabilities described by Manu are similar to those suffered by the modern Depressed Classes. Since it is in Manu that we come across for the first time a categorical segregation of groups of men, we may presume that it was from 200 A.D., the date of Manu,⁵⁹ that untouchability became established in the Indian society. Milder forms of it are discernible upto 300 B.C., from the Jātakas and Dharmasūtras.⁶⁰ This view is also held by Dr. A.L. Basham⁶¹ and Louis Dumont.⁶²

Dr.B.R.Ambedkar fixes 400 A.D., as the probable date of origin of untouchability. He bases his views on the fact that it was at this date that slaughter of cows and beef-eating were banned by law and regarded as crimes.⁶³ Dr.Ambedkar is of the view that untouchability is connected with beef-eating. Hence, he says that until the Gupta period the Candālas and other low classes were only temporarily Untouchables and that too only to the Brāhmins during times of sacrifice.⁶⁴ Beef-eating is not the sole cause of untouchability. But there is evidence to prove the fact that Candālas were regarded as Untouchables long before 400 A.D.⁶⁵

Brahmāvarta, the land between Punjab and Bihar⁶⁶

may be taken as the place where the evil of Untouchability sprouted. Ghurya remarks, "caste in India is a Brāhmanic child of the Indo-Āryan culture, cradled in the land of the Gangā and Yamuna and transferred to the other parts of the country."⁶⁷

An Evaluation of the Theories :

The point of argument for the different scholars is that the Depressed Classes of India were the native tribes and that they were reduced to serfdom either by the Dravidians or Āryans. It is also contended that the segregation of these tribes must have been occasioned by the difference in their cultural levels. Next is whether the conquered and suppressed aborigines of South India were pre-Dravidians or Dravidians. So far as South India is concerned, they might have been a less-civilised portion of the Dravidian race inhabiting the country from time immemorial. This view finds support from anthropologists and ethnologists. The nasal index of the high caste Hindus and the Untouchables in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Bihar, Kerala, and Karnataka is almost the same.⁶⁸ Marked differences could not be found

between high caste Hindus and Untouchables throughout India.⁶⁹

If the Depressed Classes are to be taken as Dravidians, then the question arises as to why one group of the same race treats another of the same race as Untouchables. Answer to this may be found in the wave theory of Dravidian migration into South India. Maclean is of the view that two waves of Dravidian invaders, namely Pre-Tamilian and Tamilian, came to South India, and of the two, one was older and less-civilized than the other.⁷⁰ The second wave of invaders suppressed the first and differences in the cultures of the two resulted in the segregation of the former by the latter. Dr. Speech also contends that the Dravidians came in successive waves and some among them were the authors of the megalithic culture which knew about iron and the cultivation of rice by artificial means.⁷¹ Prof. K.A. Nilakanta Sāstri also opines that the Āryans and Dravidians came to India in different waves over a period of years.⁷²

The early Dravidians who came to South India were engaged in simple form of agriculture and led a



less-cultured life than those who came later. After having been subjugated by the Dravidians who came later, the earlier ones gave up their lands and segregated themselves into separate habitations called Cēris. They became serfs and casual labourers of the Vellālas or the landlords. Driven by poverty and by their inferior position in society, they were forced to do all kinds of dirty and menial jobs. Later, when Dravidian kings came to rule in Tamil Nādu, the situation still worsened. The kings were imbued with Āryan principles of pollution and Varnāśramadharmā and they distributed all cultivable lands among Brahmanised Vellālas and imposed untouchability with a vengeance on the serfs and menials. Another theory is that the so-called Depressed Classes or Untouchables segregated themselves and later, the Brāhmins made them Untouchables permanently. The habit of Paraiyas and Holeyas shunning the entry of Brahmins into their villages is cited in support of this theory.⁷³

Conclusion :

As noted at the outset, it is only from deductions, surmises and inferences that it has been possible to

trace the origin and development of the Depressed Classes and Untouchability in India. An irrefutable fact is that untouchability has been widely practised in all parts of India. With the spread of Brahmanical Hinduism, caste distinctions too spread, bringing in their wake the evil of untouchability.

..

References

..

1. Rice, Stanley, Hindu Customs and their Origins, pp.113-115.
2. Caldwell, Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages, App. IV, p.546, 549.
3. Ibid., p.549
4. Ghurye, Caste, Class and Occupation in India, p.116.
5. A.R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism, p.234.
6. Oppert, Original Inhabitants of Bharata Varsha. p.621.
7. Ibid., p.60.
8. Ibid., p.78.
9. N.K. Dutt, Origin and Growth of Caste in India, p.106.
10. Ghurye, Caste and Class in India, p.625.
11. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, Who were the Shudras?, p.238.
12. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, The Untouchables, p.27.

13. Ibid., p.26
14. V.R.R. Dikshitar, quoted in South India in the Ramayana Age, p.51.
15. D.R. Bhandarkar, Lectures on the Ancient History of India, pp.25-28.
16. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Op. Cit; p.59.
17. Gokhale, Budhism and Asoka, Preface by Fr. Heras.
18. A letter of Sundaram Pillai quoted in History of South Indian Caste, p.22. Also see Marai Mala Adigal, Tamilar Matam, Preface, p.xviii.
19. Caldwell, Comparative Grammer, p.24.
20. Hutton, Census in India, 1931, I. 1 Para. 154.
21. Haimendorf, quoted by K.A.N. Sastri in Cultural Contacts Between Aryans and Dravidians, p.16.
22. Ibid., Chapter V.
23. Dr. Speech quoted in K.A.N. Sastri, Op.Cit.
24. Ibid.
25. Ghosh, Āryan Trails in Iran and India, p.218
26. R. Choudry, Vratyas in Ancient India, p.139.

27. R.S. Sharma, Sūdras in Ancient India, p.208.
28. Ibid., p.35.
29. Ibid., p.280.
30. Rig Vēda, I, 117-8; VIII 85.3.4; I,116-23.
31. Ibid., I, 158.6.
32. R.S. Sharma, Op.Cit; p.24.
33. P.V. Kane, History of Dharma Sāstras, Vol. II, Part-I, p.165.
34. Rig Vēda, X, 12.
35. R.C. Dutt, Early Hindu Civilization, p.67.
36. Rig Veda, IX, 112, p.1.
37. Ibid., i.24.
38. The Vedic Age, p.451 in the History and Culture of the Indian People, ed., by R.C. Majumdar.
39. N.K. Dutt, Op.Cit; Vol. I. p.274.
40. S.N. Vyas, India in the Ramayana Age, p.67.
41. P.V. Kane, Op.Cit., Vol. ii, Part-I, p.XI.
42. Vasishtha IV. 37, Baudhāyana I. 5:6, Āpastamba II., 1.2:8 and 9.
43. Āpastamba II., 1.2:8 and 9.

44. Vishnu Dharmasūtra V., 104, quoted by P.V. Kane, Op.Cit., Vol., II, Part-I, p.176.
45. Gautama, XXIII - 32.
46. Jatakas, iv. 390-1, 397.
47. Ficks, Social Organization, pp.318-29.
48. Agarwals, India as known to Panini, p.275.
49. Ibid.
50. Buhler, Sacred Books of the East, Introduction, pp.CXIV - CXVIII.
51. Manu, X. 4.
52. Manu, X. 50-51; 54-55.
53. Ibid., ii, 276.
54. Manu, iii. 92, 239.
55. Ibid, V.85.
56. Ibid., X. 51, 52, 54.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 51, 52, 55, 56.
59. Vide Reference 36, Supra.
60. Vide Reference 18, Supra.
61. A.L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, p.144.

62. Louis Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus, pp.52-53.
63. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Op.Cit; p.140.
64. Ibid.
65. Vide Reference 26, 29, 30, 31, Supra.
66. Manu, ii, 17-23.
67. Ghurye, Op.Cit; p.155.
68. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Op.Cit; p.62.
69. Ibid., p.63.
70. Quoted by Thurston in his Castes and Tribes of South India, Vol., I, Introduction, p.XXXIV.
71. Quoted by K.A.N. Sastri in his Cultural Contacts between the Āryans and the Dravidians, p.16.
72. Ibid., p.7.
73. Sivashanmugam Pillai, J., History of the Ādi-Dravidas, p.13.

...