

A HISTORICAL STUDY ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF THE DEPRESSED CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination among the society is one of the foremost and peculiar characteristics in India. The discriminated depressed classes have been treated with contempt by the so-called high-class people. These people are oppressed and suppressed in many ways. Most of the people belonging to the depressed classes were agricultural laborers. Poverty was dear to them and made themselves pledge to the lands for sums of minimum wages. Further, children of the depressed classes were devised the privilege of getting education. To solve the above, sowing illness/so-called depressed class should be empowered politically and educationally to resolve their problems and social justice.

KEYWORDS: *The Oppressed Hindus, Exploitations of Depressed Classes, Education Status, Separate Schools for Depressed Classes*

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the depressed classes or the untouchables have been treated with contempt by the so-called high-class people. By this nasty attitude, civilization has been marred. The untouchables have been unbearable sights to some of the fanatics who adored the varnasrama dharam. They are considered below the Sudras who form the lowest social order in the varna dharam.

'Civilization' was hesitant to touch them sympathetically and left these unfortunate souls at the mercy of the uncivilized mankind. The so-called high-class people considered these people as an embodiment of pollution. Their appearance, their touch, their speech, their shadow and even their breathing would cause pollution.

Attitude of High-Class People

Living in darkness, these people brought light to the so-called high-class people, and the reward had been humiliation, aversion, avoidance and antipathy. Their life in short was not worth living. The dwelling place of these unfortunate people was called cheri or slum. This was naturally a considerable distance from the habitation of upper class Hindus. The slum can be likened to the unseen hell. It was indeed nasty because of lack of hygienic condition.

Conditions for Depressed Class

Most of the people belonging to the depressed classes were agricultural laborers. Some were assigned menial tasks like scavenging. They made others live a healthy life but they had borne all the filth on themselves. This was inevitable due to the prevailing social condition. In most cases, the huts where they lived did not belong to them. Most horrifying of all was

the depressed classes could not claim ownership even to their own possessions. Poverty was dear to them and made themselves pledged to the landlords for sums varying between 40 and 50 rupees. This pledging resulted in bonded labor in some of the cases because they never attained the position to redeem themselves.

The agricultural laborers who belonged to the depressed classes received daily wages at the rate of two ordinary measures of paddy, which worked out to one Madras measure (about one and a quarter Madras measure is equivalent to 2 kilograms). This too was not denied to them at the end of their day's toil. Several families of the depressed classes served the landlords as bonded laborers. Such families were assigned 25 cents of land for their own cultivation. The produce from this land and their daily earnings worked out to about 42 Madras measures of paddy per annum. Consequently, the depressed classes could never pacify the pangs of hunger. There was also not relaxation in the quantum of labor extracted from them. The landlords were so crafty and unmindful of the sufferings of these unfortunate people, that they could always devise ways and means to delay or avoid payment.

The depressed classes could never expect human treatment from their masters. It was quite common for the women of the depressed classes, even in an advanced state of pregnancy to toil under the scorching sun. They could not ever nurse their infants without being subjected to the wrath of the landlords. Both men and women had to work from sunrise till sunset.

Suffering of Depressed Class

The use of public wells, tanks and roads was prohibited to the depressed classes. They had to draw drinking water from stinking muddy and unhygienic pools. Unkempt hair, rags of clothing, sickly and withered bodies – had been the general appearance of the depressed classes. They were prohibited from applying oil and combing their hair. The village barber's services were denied to the depressed classes. They were required to dress themselves only in rags. They were prohibited from christening their children with names commonly used by the higher castes. They were forbidden to take up any profession or occupation other than scavenging and other menial tasks.

Status of Children of the Depressed Classes

Children of the depressed classes were denied the privilege of education. They were meant to tend herds of cattle only. If at all one or two managed to get primary education in the schools run by the public sector, such education was of no consequence. Tremenheere, the Collector of Chingleput sums up the condition of the depressed classes thus: "Always badly nourished, clad if at all in the vilest rags, eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases; huddled like pigs; untaught, uncared for, and unpitied"

Exploitations of Depressed Classes

The depressed classes were also exploited by petty officials of the government. Since the depressed class were illiterate, it was comparatively easy for the petty officials, in collusion with people of the higher castes, to cheat the depressed classes. It had been the general practice to turn down, on frivolous grounds, the applications made by people of the depressed classes for allotment of government wastelands. Invariably, the petty officials of government were members of the higher castes and they had no sympathy towards the depressed classes.

There were also instances when applications for allotment of wasteland were turned down on the plea that the applicant did not possess a pair of bullocks. It was common practice for the village officials to collect excessive taxes from

the depressed classes and also cheat them in many other ways. Those who failed to meet the unjust demands of the petty officials were subjected to such hardships. Even in the classification of wastelands, caste distinctions played a decisive role. Better lands were reserved for high caste Hindus and marshy, barren or rocky wasteland was assigned to the depressed classes. There were also instances in which large-scale atrocities were committed by other communities on the depressed classes. Such instances were brought to the attention of the Government by the members of the Legislative Council, but the government could not do anything concrete on this, as there was lack of co-operation from the public.

In the government service also there was no proper encouragement to the depressed classes. This was particularly the case with the police department. The young men of the depressed classes, who joined the police force as constables, were often subjected to humiliating treatment by their superiors and were denied promotion to higher ranks. This was mainly due to the fact that the higher police officials were invariably caste Hindus. This has been often referred to by R. Veerian, a member of the Legislative Council.

The depressed classes were denied basic civic rights. Men without rights are nothing but slaves. The depressed classes were nothing but slaves not having any basic civic rights. There are plenty of instances, which show how these unfortunate people were prevented from using public highways, tanks, etc. The taboo of untouchability was intertwined with the denial of civic rights. Even after the establishment of the British Raj, there occurred several instances in different parts of the Presidency, where the caste Hindus treated the depressed classes as sub-humans. They were segregated from the rest of the Hindu society.

The incident of a magistrate in Kodaikanal imposing a fine of rupee one on an Adi-Dravida boy for singing a song on untouchability in the public road, was reported in the vernacular daily 'Dravidan' and the matter was also raised in the Legislative Council in 1921. From this and similar instances, it may be inferred that the depressed classes were denied even the basic right of using public roads. Such instances were instrumental for the passing of a resolution demanding the right to use public roads, at the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha Conference at Pennathur, Chidambaram Taluk on 27.08.1921. In spite of the G.O. No. 37 Public (Misc.) dated 09.01.1925, the depressed classes were denied the right of way in Palghat town in Malabar. Nayadis and Pulaiyas were not permitted to go to the public markets and bazaars. This was brought to the attention of the Legislative Council by one of its members R. Veerian on 08.02.1926. Even though there was a G.O. granting the right of way to the depressed classes in public pathways, the caste Hindus had been preventing the depressed classes from using the pathways through Agraharams. It was brought to the notice of the legislative Council by R. Veerian that while giving evidence in the Vadikapaliam Village Court, in Pollachi Taluk, the members of the depressed classes were made to stand outside the premises under the scorching sun and in rain.

Status of Oppressed and Depressed Classes

In 1927, during elections to local bodies in Walajapet, the voters belonging to the depressed classes were made to stand in a separate queue under the sun by the officers conducting the election. This incident too was reported by R. Veerian in the Legislative Council. The indifference of government to settling the problems of segregation has been brought to light in an incident narrated by M. C. Raja in his book, 'The Oppressed Hindus'. Raja writes: "The Minister for Local Government, when asked about the non-appointment of an Adi-Dravida representative on the Chidambaram Taluk Board said that the owner of the rented-house in which the Taluk Board Office is located has objected to the Adi-Dravida representative entering the premises. On this reply, I asked the Minister a series of questions how a public office which, according to the

Standing Orders of Government, should be located in a place to which all castes and communities ought to have access, came to be located under such adverse conditions and the Hon'ble Minister was sympathetic enough to give me the reply, 'The government have no information'. These facts constitute the most tragic commentary on the attitude of these Ministers.

It was alleged in the Legislative Council that barbers refused to shave the police constables belonging to the depressed classes. In answer to a question raised by R. Veeriar, it was replied that no police personnel belonging to the depressed classes were posted for bandobust duty during Kalpathi Car Festival. Car Festival is something which takes place outside the temple precincts. If the depressed classes were not permitted to view the festival even from outside the temple precincts, it shows the magnitude of segregation. Government's policy of not posting depressed class police personnel even for bandobust duty goes to prove its collusion with caste-Hindu forces. Another pathetic example of the treatment meted out to the depressed classes was cited by V. P. Munuswami Pillai in the Legislative Council. It was stated that patients belonging to the Adi-Dravida community were given separate wards in mean out-houses in the Women's and Children's Hospital, Calicut.

Discriminations in Jails

It is disconcerting to note that even in jails convicts belonging to the depressed classes were segregated. The practice of operating separate mess for the depressed class convicts in the District Civil Jail of Madurai was alleged in the Legislative Council.

In the Fourth Session of the Second Legislative Council, R. Veerian queried: "Whether the delay in burying the dead body of an Adi-Dravida in Ellasmannor, Villupuram Taluk, was due to the orders of the Health Inspector and the opposition of the caste people of the locality to the use by the Adi-Dravidas of their customary burial ground and the Public pathway leading thereto

In March 1930, the Kallars of Ezhuvar Kottai village in the Devakottai Taluk of Ramnad District held a conference, at which it was decided to impose eight prohibitions on the behaviour and general appearance of the depressed classes.. The prohibitions thus imposed were absolutely inhuman. Members of the depressed classes who refused to observe these prohibitions thus imposed were absolutely inhuman. Members of the depressed classes who refused to observe these prohibitions were brutally assaulted and fines were imposed. The cattle of the depressed classes were forcibly taken away. The Kallars openly plundered the cheris and assaulted the inhabitants. Huts and granaries of the depressed classes were set on fire. Even the thalis (mangalasutra) of women were forcibly wrenched away from their necks.

Education Status

In the matter of education, the depressed classes were far behind others. In 1881, the population of the depressed classes in the Madras presidency was 4,439,330. By 1891, this had increased to 5,162,086. The general plight of these people was extremely bad. In 1891, government took several measures to improve the lot of the depressed classes. Steps were taken to afford educational facilities to the children of these unfortunate people, separate primary schools were established for the depressed classes. The Hindu, a leading English daily published from Madras, wrote in 1891 "It is impossible to expect caste Hindu children and these classes to study together in the same school nor can much be expected from local boards...

Government is perfectly justified in showing special consideration to a class, whose condition must be a blot on any civilized social system.”

Separate Schools for Depressed Classes

Starting of separate schools for the depressed classes did not solve the problem of education. The caste prejudices of the officers were a stumbling block, which could not be easily overcome. Most of the inspecting officials of the Department of Education belonged to the higher castes and they were unwilling to enter the slums and inspect the schools of the depressed classes. In 1905, an instance was brought to the attention of the Government by the Christian Missionary Society the caste conscious inspector was unwilling to enter the village of the depressed classes and hence he called the whole school well beyond the village and conducted his inspection. The inspector examined the answer papers of the pupils from a distance of 10 feet, touched by the pitiable plight of those unfortunate children.

“If India’s conditions are understood, it would be readily admitted that the Brahmin or other high caste inspector can never as a rule bring himself to do justice, much less to treat with sympathy the pupils who are untouchable outcasts.” It was commented by the Madras Mail (August 13, 1908) that the officials of government belonging to the higher castes displayed a hostile attitude towards the education of the lower classes.

CONCLUSIONS

Dr. Ambedkar opined that only political empowerment and education would resolve their problems of social justice. Further, depressed class began organizing themselves, demanding their needs from the government. Further, the basic education for depressed class will be able to get decent jobs. They are able to earn decent wages. If educationally and economically they are empowered, automatically their social status will be improved.

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