



## DALITS IN TRADITIONAL TAMIL SOCIETY

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### Introduction

'Dalits in Traditional Tamil Society', highlights the classification of dalits, their numerical strength, the different names of the dalits in various regions, explanation of the concept of the dalit, origin of the dalits and the practice of untouchability, the application of distinguished criteria for the dalits and caste-Hindus, identification of sub-divisions amongst the dalits, namely, Chakkiliyas, Kuravas, Nayadis, Pallars, Paraiyahs and Valluvas, and the major dalit communities in the Tamil Country, namely, Paraiyahs, Pallas, Valluvas, Chakkiliyas or Arundathiyars, the usage of the word 'depressed classes' by the British officials to denote all the dalits, the usage of the word 'Scheduled Castes' to denote 86 low caste communities as per the Indian Council Act of 1935, Gandhi's usage of the word 'Harijan' to denote the dalits, M.C. Rajah's opposition of the usage of the word 'Harijan', the usage of the term 'Adi-Darvida' to denote the dalits of the Tamil Country, the distribution of the four major dalit communities in the Tamil Country, the strength of the dalits in the 1921 Census, a brief sketch about the condition of the dalits in the past, the touch of the Christian missionaries on the dalits of the Tamil Country, the agrestic slavery of the dalits in the modern Tamil Country, the patterns of land control, the issue of agrestic servitude of dalits, the link of economic and social developments with the changing agrarian structure and the subsequent profound impact on the lives of the Dalits and the constructed ideas of native super-ordination and subordination which placed the dalits at the mercy of the dominant communities in Tamil Society'.

### Taxinomy of Dalits

The most socially and politically acceptable name for the most disadvantaged members of the Indian society has changed over the years. Outcastes and untouchables have become unacceptable. The last two hundred years have seen the emergence of a new identity among the 200 million people who have been considered "Outcastes" or "Untouchables". In the Indian context, 'the Dalits' (Sanskrit word literally means "broken, split, torn asunder) of today are the 'Depressed Classes' of the yester-years. Nowadays, the term 'Dalits' is a popular term used to denote the untouchables of India. This 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 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 usage was first coined by B.R. Ambedkar to denote the Scheduled Castes. This term became applicable only to the members of the Mahar Community in Maharashtra but later it included all the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Neo-Buddhists, landless labourers and those economically exploited. The term "depressed Classes" was used in the British circles and also by various reform movements to refer to all kinds of depressed people including "Untouchables", without differentiating on the basis of religion. The Dalit community is basically a self-sustaining society. The Dalit community Class has a special history. For more than 3500 years, the Hindu religion has treated the Dalits as low and untouchable, and has perpetrated atrocity on them. The Brahmin Manu has codified the philosophy of this religion and the Iwa to oppress the dalits.

### Numerical Strength

The dalits comprised of a number of distinct groups, and were condemned as untouchables by the caste- Hindus through centuries. The dalit classes were divided into three categories – untouchables, unapproachables and unseeables. They numbered about sixty million out of three hundred million Hindus. That is to say, very nearly twenty percent of Hindustan was dalits. They formed one fifth of the total population of the Madras Presidency. They inhabited in all the districts of the Tamil Country. Among them, the Pallas and Paraiyahs were notable labourers residing in every village. The Pallas constituted 21 percent of the Dalit population in Tamil Country, while the other groups such as the Paraiyahs and Chakkiliyas accounted for 59 per cent and 16 per cent respectively.

### Different Names

Till the Nineteenth Century, the dalits were called by different names in different parts of the country. They were called 'depressed', 'oppressed', 'suppressed', 'submerged', 'unregenerate', 'underprivileged' 'outcaste', 'untouchables', 'low caste', 'Pariah', 'Panchama', 'Adi-Sudra', 'Avanna', 'Antyaja', 'Exterior caste', 'Excluded caste', 'Neglected section of the Hindus' and Namashudras. These names speak of their ignominious status in Tamil society. As long as the dalits are identified with these names, their status will remain unchanged. Psychologically viewing, these names will leave an unerasing imprint on the minds of these people who will hardly think in terms of relieving themselves from the clutches of



exploitation. The best known amongst Tamil Dalits were the Paraiyahs, settled in the northern districts of Tamil Country and the Pallas, settled in the southern districts including Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli. Their social disabilities were specific and severe and numerous. Their touch, shadow and even voice were deemed by the caste- Hindus to be polluting. So they had to clear the way at the approach of a caste Hindu. Even their shadow to cross the path of the Brahmins called for ritual ablution. They were forbidden to keep certain domestic animals, to use certain metals for ornaments; were 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 loin cloth. The women wore bodices and rough sarees barely reaching the knees.

### **Dalits – Concept**

The 'Dalit' in Marathi means the poor and the downtrodden. It is appropriate to denote the untouchables who are not included in the *Chaturvarna* System of the Hindu society. The 'Adi- Dravidas' of Tamil Nadu who were once called Panchamas, Paraiyas, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, Harijans, etc. The Dalits, otherwise known as the number of distinguished groups which formed the lowest strata of the Hindu society were condemned as untouchable, unapproachable and unseeable people by the Caste Hindus through centuries. They were about one fifth of the total population of India and it is more or less the same in Tamil Nadu.

The untouchables had different names in different parts of the country. They were generally called Paraiyas, Panchamas, Adi- Sudhras Avamas, Antyajas, Ammana Sudhras and in Tamil Nadu, they were called Panchamas, Paraiyas, Adi- Dravidas etc., but sometimes by the common term Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, and Harijans. Their Social disabilities throughout the country were unique.

### **Orgin of Dalits and Untouchability in Tamils Country**

From time immemorial, the society in India has been divided into numerous hereditary groups called castes. The word '*Caste*' is derived from the Latin term '*Castes*', meaning 'pure'. The Portuguese were the first to use this term to describe the social stratification in India. Caste is an artificial division of society in India. A caste is an endogamous group or a collection of similar groups. Such a group has a common name, believes in common origin, follows a hereditary occupation, possesses common rituals, ceremonies and forms of worship and regards itself as distinct and separate from other groups.

The compilers of the Census of 1881 who made a thorough investigation into the ramifications of the caste have noted the incredible figure of 19, 044 denominations of sub - castes in the Madras Presidency alone. An individual's fate in life and the status in society were wholly determined by the caste to which he belonged. Though, originally, caste distinctions appeared on the basis of vocations, in course of time the rigours imposed by these distinctions increased and consequently some benefited, while others were instrumental in deciding the social taboos ushering in segregation of men into Touchables and Untouchables. By and large, nearly one fifth of the total population was segregated from the rest of the society as untouchables.

The ancient Tamil society did not contain any Dalits and consequently the practice of untouchability was absent. The emergence of the Dalits was mainly due to the process of Aryanization which introduced the notion of imaginary purity and impurity supposed to be attainable by the avoidance of certain taboos and the observance of certain rites prescribed by the *Dharmasastras*. It should also be noted that the practice of untouchability was not uniform throughout India. There were differences in the degree of untouchability. The phenomenon of untouchability is closely related to the condition of the Dalits. Untouchability is an Indian concept and could be understood in the Indian context only. The term 'Untouchability' is the English equivalent of expression '*asprasya*' in Sanskrit, '*theetu*' in Tamil, and '*pula*' in both Kannada and Malayalam which means pollution. According to B.R. Ambedkar, Untouchability underlines "the notion of defilement, pollution and contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that defilement".

In the opinion of Aiyappan, it is "the socio-religious practice by which Hindus keep large numbers of the lower castes from touching or coming near their persons, houses, temples, tanks and sometimes even public roads". He calls it 'contact taboo' by which "persons, by reason of their birth or physiological or ritual state act as carriers of pollution and induce temporarily a similar state in others by their contact, either direct or within a prescribed distance, which impurity has to be removed by ritual means to restore those polluted to their original condition."

The Untouchables numbering several millions have been isolated from the rest of the society and forced to live in the outskirts of the Caste Hindu habitations. Untouchability has been practised in its worst form only with regard to the lowest caste such as Pallas, Pariahs, and Chacklians who have been at the bottom of the society. The British Administrators were the



first to coin the words “Untouchable” and “Untouchability” to denote the Dalits and their social conditions. Census of India (1911), says that prior to the advent of the British, the phenomenon of Untouchability did not exist too much and even the Untouchables did not feel that any injustice was being done to them by their castes. The British were the pioneers in distinguishing the untouchables from the rest of the Hindu society making them conscious of their disabilities.

Until the end of the Nineteenth Century, the untouchables were considered one among the Hindu groups. Till that time the Indian population was divided on the basis of religion namely Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. The Muslims in 1904 addressed Lord Minto and specified the Indian population as (1) Hindu, (2) Animist Tribals (3) the Untouchables.

Then the Census Commissioner of India distinguished Caste Hindus and Untouchables applying the following criteria:

1. Deny the supremacy of the Brahmins;
2. Do not receive the mantra from a Brahmin or other recognized guru;
3. Deny the authority of the Vedas;
4. Do not worship the Hindu Gods;
5. Are not served by good Brahmins as family priests;
6. Have no Brahmin Priests at all;
7. Are denied access to the interior of the Hindu temple;
8. Cause pollution: a) by touch, or b) within a short distance
9. Bury their dead
10. Eat beef and do not show reverence to the cow.

These items sum up the content and meaning of untouchability. Further, this

#### **Sub – Divisions of Dalits the Tamil Country**

The practice of collecting data on caste in the Census was in vogue till 1931. The Census Reports of the year’s 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941 listed forty major Hindu castes. In the year 1964, the Government recognized 120 castes as eligible for special treatment. Of these, six castes, Chakkiliyans, Kuravans, Nayadi, Pallan, Paraiyan and Valluvan receive special treatment since these six castes are found in all parts of Tamil Nadu and hence they have been considered.

#### **Depressed Classes**

The term ‘Depressed Classes’ which denoted the Panchamas, sprang out of administrative Convenience. A perusal of the official records shows that this term was in currency between 1920 and 1935. In the Census Report of 1921, over six million people covering nine castes were listed Depressed Classes, such as Adi-Dravida, Chakkiliya, Cheruman, Holey, Madiga, Mala, Palla, Paraiyah and Semman. The figures given in this report could only be regarded as an approximation because no effort had yet been made till then to define the term ‘Depressed’. But in 1931, based on the stigma of untouchability, the Depressed Classes were identified and enumerated and 15.5 percent of the population of the Madras Presidency was found to belong to this category. The Census Report states: “Viewed primarily regarding the existence of social disabilities, the figure is a minimum, considered strictly as personal polluting power, the figure is a maximum.”

#### **Scheduled Castes**

Changes which took place in the terminology of the Depressed Classes did not end with the change to “Adi-Dravidas”. An order-in-council issued under the Government of India Act of 1935 listed all the hereditary Untouchable Communities in the different provinces in a special schedule. Thereafter these castes came to be designated as ‘Scheduled Castes’. In the list concerning Madras Presidency, eighty six communities came under the category of ‘Scheduled Castes’. In 1941, the population of Madras Presidency, including the Princely States of Pudukottai, Banganapile, and Sandur was 49,840,564. Out of this, 8,152,226 belonged to the Scheduled Castes; the breakup of males and females was 4,064,233 and 4,087,993 respectively. In the Census of 1941, population enumeration was done according to religions such as, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jain, Parsis, Buddhists and Jews. The Scheduled Castes were not included under any of these heads and their enumeration was separate.

#### **Harijans**

The Scheduled Castes and Tribes were christened as ‘Harijans’ by Mahatma Gandhi. The literal meaning of the term ‘Harijan’ is ‘Children of God’. The first to use the word ‘Harijan’ to denote the Untouchables was Narashima Mehta, a great saint who belonged to the Nagar Brahmana community. Mahatma Gandhi used the term ‘Harijan’ to mean ‘Men of God’. The Government recognized the term ‘Harijan’ and issued an order in 1947. The order stated thus: “the Government have directed that the term ‘Harijans’ should be used to denote persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes in all public records except in proceedings under statutory enactments until the statute is amended”.

M.C.Rajah raised strong objection to Gandhi’s calling the Depressed Classes as Harijans. Rajah’s contention was that the term ‘Harijan’ meaning ‘Children of God’ denoted all Hindus and hence inappropriate for the Depressed Classes. He



regarded names like 'Adi-Dravida', 'Adi-Andhra' and 'Adi-Karnataka' as appropriate. Rajah asserted that the castes concerned could very well adopt a name for themselves and that no one else had the right to give them a name. Though Gandhi popularized the term 'Harijan', instead, the terms 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Schedules Tribes' have been incorporated in the Constitution. The term 'Harijan' has not been found in the Constitution of India. Moreover the term 'Harijan' is not found in Government records.

### Adi – Dravidas

The term Adi-Dravidas was not in use before 1921. The Untouchables of Tamil Nadu were called Panchamas, Paraiyahs and similar names. M.C. Rajah moved a resolution in 1922 in the Madras Legislative Council stating that in the place in terms like Paraiyah, Panchamas etc., Adi-Dravida is to be used in the Tamil region, Adi-Andhra in Telugu Region, Adi-Kamataka in the Kannada region. And the resolution was that in Government records the terms Adi-Dravida, Adi-Andhra,

### Conclusion

The word, 'Dalit' does not appear in any sacred scriptures or historical texts of India. It is actually a word base on the Seventeenth Century European notions about the Indian caste system. The word, 'Dalit' was not familiar till the last century. The better understood words were Depressed Classes, Untouchables, Harijans and Scheduled Castes in pre-Independence era. The term Harijan was indeed used by Narasimha Mehta, a saint and reformer of Gujarat in the Twentieth Century and was popularized by Gandhi. The shift from Harijan to Dalit was not without purposive reason. The term 'Dalit' gave them a special and dignified identity. The term Dalit' has become an increasingly popular way of referring to those outside the caste system who were known as Untouchables. However the term should be taken a simple synonym for the word the untouchables. This is because people who refer to themselves as dalits are asserting a new form of identity. Though the term 'Dalit' began to be used widely during 1970s it was used earlier by B.R. Ambedkar to describe the Scheduled Castes. Earlier to him the social reformer Jothibha Phule seems to have been the first to use the word 'dalit' in connection with caste in the term dalitdhar - uplift of the depressed. Literally, the word 'dalit' means crushed or oppressed but in India, it covers most of the communities who are victims of bias, based on caste and religion or of socio-political injustice. The contemporary use of 'Dalit' is centred on the idea that as a people they may have been broken by oppression but they survive and even thrive by finding way in the struggle for existence towards human dignity. In the traditional Tamil society, the Dalits, otherwise known as the number of distinguished groups which formed the lowest strata of the Hindu society were condemned as untouchable, unapproachable and unseeable people by the Caste Hindus through centuries.

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