



ONWARD MARCH OF DEPRESSED CLASSES TOWARDS MOVEMENT: TRACK TO NON-BRAHMIN VIOLENT RESENTMENT IN COLONIAL TAMIL REGION DURING 1919- 1937

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ABSTRACT

The term depressed classes used in official records between 1920 and 1935 by the British, denotes the people those who socially, economically and politically oppressed by the dominated castes. These depressed classes realized their degradable position due to the introduction of English education which allowed all people in schools irrespective of their castes. In addition their organisations and leaders kindled them to fight for their rights. In the first half of 20th century it shaped into a movement called depressed class movement. The liberating sense of depressed classes infuriated the dominated castes especially Brahmins and non-brahmin caste-Hindus. Though Brahmins opposed the movement of depressed classes they did not attack them directly. They used non-brahmin caste-Hindus as a weapon to attack depressed classes. Consequently heavy violent outburst started throughout Tamilnadu. Strict rules imposed on depressed classes and compelled to obey that order. Those who violated that rules were ruthlessly attacked their houses were burnt. This paper investigates the stages of depressed classes movement led by the depressed class leaders and sangams and its subsequent violent outbursts led by non-Brahmins. The terms Adi-dravida and caste-Hindus have been used in few places to mention depressed classes and non-Brahmins respectively.

KEYWORDS

Depressed classes, Sangams, Movement, Violent outburst

Introduction

The composite state of Madras was a home of conservatism and orthodoxy where caste had taken deep-root and its ramifications were numerous.¹ Risley has defined caste as "a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling, and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community."² It is difficult to say when the institution of caste originated in the south. Perhaps the conquest of southern India by the Aryans and the consequent fusion between them and the inhabitants of the land could have been the possible cause of the birth of caste system.³ In course of time innumerable castes and sub-castes came into existence, obviously because of violation of caste rules and various other reasons.⁴ The evil brought in by the caste system reached its climax when it condemned a set of helpless people as outcastes and untouchables, treating them sometimes worse than the filthiest animals.⁵ The so-called untouchables who were originally outside the caste system came to be known as depressed classes and formed the lowest caste, whose touch, even sight was treated as despicable to the caste Hindus. However, the broken men who were deliberately degraded as untouchables by the Brahminical forces had never accepted their position. They had protested against it from the beginning itself.⁶ After 1920 it became a mass movement.

The term Depressed Classes in British records

There has been number of terms and names adorned to depressed classes. Manu, the ancient law giver had used the terms 'Mlechha' and 'Chandala'. In the medieval period the terms 'Panchama', the fifth class, 'Avarna', outside the four varnas, 'Nishada Paulkasa', 'Antyaja', 'Atishudra', etc were used. 'Harijans', a term coined by Narasimha Mehta, adopted and popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. J.H.Hutton used the term exterior caste and the British officials used 'Pariah', 'depressed classes' and 'scheduled caste'.⁷ The term depressed classes was used by the British officials sometimes in the late 19th century to refer the people who were considered and treated as untouchables in the caste system.⁸ The term depressed classes can be seen in the first volumes of the Bombay gazetteer published in 1877.⁹ It has been also found in

the official records between the years 1920 and 1935. It was freely used during Round Table Conferences and in all Commission's Report.¹⁰

Depressed classes in Tamil society

As per the Brahmin caste system a person born in a particular caste either enjoyed the fruits of it or carried its burden for the whole of his life.¹¹ Under this system a group of people were made mere serfs, and assigned to them only menial or filthy occupations. Consequently, they became untouchables in their own land. They were made to live separately and often were barred from sharing such common village amenities as the well. They were very poorly compensated for their labour and were forced to live on the brink of starvation. Their diet was poor; their cloths were few and rarely clean; their homes were small, fragile and unhealthy; and they were hopelessly in debt. Poverty and indebtedness led them to bondage, living at the beck and call of the landlord, rather than as an independent, self-respecting person.¹²

Sangams to movement

Regarding depressed classes movement there are controversial opinion among the historians. L.S.S.O' Malley says that depressed class movement as a movement for the uplifting the "untouchables" initiated and sustained by others.¹³ Majumdar describes depressed classes as objects of philanthropic and social work conducted by others.¹⁴ Beginning with the work of Eleanor Zelliot in 1969, the assessment of historians on depressed class movement changed. According to John C.B.Webster "Dalits (depressed classes) may not have had a single organization parallel to the Muslim League or the Hindu Mahasabha, but they did have grassroots organizations; a recognized leadership, pre-eminent among whom was B.R.Ambedkar; and a common demand for political recognition, for their own political representation as well as for dignity, equality and justice."¹⁵ At one stage they found the need to organize on their own. As a result various caste sangams established. Adi-dravida Mahajana Sabha, Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha, Dravida Mahajana Sabha were some early depressed classes sangams worked even before 20th century. These sangams were formed especially by the Paraiyar caste, one among the depressed classes. But in 1920s the other depressed classes also founded their sangams. Arunthathiya

Mahajana Sangam was established by H.M.Jahannatham in 1920.¹⁶ Peter Perumal belonged to Pallar caste established a sangam called Poovaisya Indrakula Sangam in 1922 in Ramnad. Most of them learned western education, worked in foreign countries and well versed in English language.¹⁷ Through the yeomen services of these leaders and sangams depressed class movement reached its zenith during 1919-37. The depressed classes sangams convened conferences frequently which conveyed their agony to the government and public. The leaders repeatedly requested the people to give up some practices such as drum beating and breast beating by their women in funerals of dominant castes, tattooing, drinking, polygamy, wearing iron and copper jewels, carrying dead bulls and eating the flesh of it and so on. They stressed to study technologies, give importance to reasoning and establish cooperative societies.¹⁸ They appealed the government for reformative laws. Consequently British India government passed series of legislations for the welfare of the depressed classes.

Era of legislations

The year 1919 constituted an important year in the history of depressed classes movement. Because the British Government formed a separate department called 'Labour Department' on 29th March 1919 to look after the welfare of the depressed classes.¹⁹ George C.F. Paddison, the senior most I.C.S. Officer was appointed as the 'Protector' of the Labour Welfare Department.²⁰ The government authorised him to start separate Labour Schools with 'Mid-day Meal Facility' to the depressed class pupils.²¹ Under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms Act of 1919, out of thirty four nominated members of the council, ten seats were reserved to the depressed classes (including others) in the Madras Legislative Council.²² When their political representation was constitutionalised by the Act of 1919, their reservation in the Government services became inevitable. With the purpose of recruiting the reserved posts of depressed classes and due to the lack of educated depressed classes for the reserved posts the government had to make legislation for providing proper education. In 1919 the government issued instructions for the admission of peoples belonging to depressed classes into schools under public management.²³ District Educational Councils were also took steps to secure admission of the boys belonging to the depressed classes into schools under private management.²⁴ Besides, government passed an order which removed the disabilities of Adi-dravidas during travel in motor buses.²⁵ Above all two resolutions regarding the free access in public sphere²⁶ and the temple entry of depressed classes²⁷ passed in the Legislative Council in 1924 and 1932 respectively induced the depressed classes to assert their rights and acted as an immediate cause for the violent outburst.

Assertion and aggression

Resolutions and acts passed in the Madras Legislative Council, legally granted permission to the depressed classes to access both secular and sacred spheres. Hence contrast to the traditional practice of untouchability which denied all these rights, the depressed classes attempted to assert their modern legal rights at common water resources, government offices, schools, buses, trains and temples. Though the method of as-

sertion of the depressed classes was non-violence it created vengeance among dominated castes. Because they feared that the elevation of depressed classes would have been moved them to the upper portion in caste hierarchy thereby the castes just above to the depressed classes would have been pushed to the vacant lower portion. In order to resist their upward movement the non-Brahmin castes were got ready to stop the advancement of depressed classes by imposing already existed caste restrictions rigorously during 1930s than before. They passed series of following resolutions to curtail the rights of depressed classes. By that resolution all Adi-dravida women should wear white sarees like so many widows. They should not wear either Ravikkais (Blouse) or in any way cover the upper parts of their bodies, any kind of gold ornaments and flowers in their necks and smear saffron paste on their faces. All men of the adi-dravidas should not wear a shirt or any other covering for the body. They should not wear their waist cloths below their knees, umbrella either for the sun or for the rain, sandals for their foot.²⁸ Moreover they were not allowed to use musical instruments, horse during marriage procession. Instead of pallakku (a decorated open structure without wheels used to carry human beings by man) they were insisted to use their house doors in the marriage procession.²⁹ Contrary to this, the depressed classes marched towards equal society. Where ever restrictions imposed vigorously depressed classes violated them valiantly. As a result violent attack broke out which caused bloodshed of depressed classes throughout colonial Tamil region. It was held both in sacred and secular places. Non- Brahmin castes were mostly involved in the violent attack on depressed classes.

Bang and blood shed

In 1920s and 1930s there were innumerable such brutal attacks broke out in Tamilnadu. For instance, at Chettykurichi in Ramnad district a trouble broke out between the Pallars and the Reddis on account of a burial ground. The Pallars had to take their dead bodies, through portions of land belonging to the Reddis. It was opposed by Reddis. Feelings between two castes had been growing stronger during 1925. On 22nd September 1925, Reddis who were suspected to be people of Madura district, brought in by the local Reddis, went to Pallapacheri in the middle of the day set fire to it and 40 houses were burnt. At the same time Vellian, one of the pallar leaders was attacked and seriously wounded with knives. He died the following day. Another pallar who was with Vellian also received two cuts but on crying out that he did not belong to Pallapacheri, he was allowed to escape.³⁰

These cruel attacks could not stop the march of depressed classes towards equal society. Instead the leaders boosted their fellowmen to continue their struggle. The study period was the ruling period of justice party, a non-Brahmin party. Though justice party did not contributed fully for the development of depressed classes it supported the leaders in their struggles and cast their votes in support of depressed classes in the Legislative Council, while depressed class leaders brought resolutions and bills for their rights. But justice party failed to stop the violent attacks made by their own caste men upon depressed classes. It always had an eye on Brahmins and their activities but never mind the atrocities done by their men over poor helpless depressed classes.

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