



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

DIFFICULTIES OF DEPRESSED CLASSES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND SEPARATE SCHOOLS IN MADRAS PRESIDENCY DURING COLONIAL PERIOD

KEY WORDS: Depressed Classes, Kudiyarasu, Aghrahams, Chavadies, educationally, economically and socially.

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ABSTRACT

A conventional term or a category, depressed classes which did not use to indicate any caste and creed, but commonly used in British records between 1920 and 1937 to denote the people of several oppressed castes, who comprised 1/5th of the total population. According to M.C Rajah, "Untouchable Classes those who are educationally, economically and socially backward are termed as "Depressed Classes". Every measure taken by the British for the sake of depressed classes were enforced by means of these separate institutions. It was commenced from the establishment of separate department called Labour Department under the head of Commissioner of Labour especially for the upliftment of depressed classes. It provided much importance to the educational development of depressed classes. At first because of the educational backwardness of depressed classes and the difficulties in accessing public schools, the leaders welcomed the effort of the British government establishing separate schools.

Introduction

A conventional term or a category, depressed classes which did not use to indicate any caste and creed, but commonly used in British records between 1920 and 1937 to denote the people of several oppressed castes, who comprised 1/5th of the total population. According to M.C Rajah, "Untouchable Classes those who are educationally, economically and socially backward are termed as "Depressed Classes".¹ James Massey points out that unlike other communities, the depressed classes have lost everything such as land, culture, language, religion, political and social rights. Their story of oppression is also much longer than that of the others.²

Since education was considered as an important tool for improving the downtrodden condition of the depressed classes, leaders always advised their people to send their children to schools for learning. All conferences of the depressed classes passed resolutions insisting the importance of getting education, the construction of schools at their locality³ and to admit their children at common schools. They addressed to the government the problem of the depressed classes' children in getting education. The British India government introduced some reforms to uplift the pitiable condition of the depressed classes in 1920's. Opening of separate schools, fee concessions, hostel facilities etc were some facilities given to the depressed classes' children for getting education.

Exclusion and Discrimination in Public Schools

Generally the depressed classes' children were denied admission both in government and aided schools. If they got admission, they were seated separately in schools and were badly beaten.⁴ It was reported by the Kudiyarasu which stated that the Head Master of Trichy government school, Sundaramaiyar allotted separate seats to Adi-Dravida students.⁵ Since the government and government aided schools were located in and around of the dominant castes habituation depressed class students were excluded from getting education. According to reports during 1921-22, 134 schools were conducted in Aghrahams, Chavadies, Temples and other inaccessible places to the depressed classes. Some schools held in rented buildings but the owners of which objected the admission of depressed classes students.⁶

During 1928-29, around 1,875 schools managed out of public funds located at inaccessible places to pupils of the depressed classes.⁷ In Sankari Taluk Board School, Nadupatti village the depressed classes students were denied admission in 1928.⁸ This data expresses that not only in the beginning of the 1920s but also in the end of the same decade number of schools were functioning in inaccessible places hence admission were denied to depressed classes. Even if the school located in accessible places also admission denied to them.

Due to the detestation in studying along with the depressed classes students, the parents of dominant caste students refused to send their children to the schools where the depressed classes'

students were enrolled. If both students studied in a same school it would led them to mix and rub shoulders thus the dominant caste parents disliked it.⁹ If the depressed classes' students sought admission or admitted in schools, the dominant caste students boycotted that school at once. In July 1926 around 50 depressed classes boys has sought for admission in the Kilathur Municipal Elementary Day Boy's School near Tiruvannamalai hence the dominant caste boys boycotted the school.¹⁰

In the Achcharapakkam Board Elementary Boy's School, Chingleput district the depressed classes' students of second standard instead of being allowed to sit along with the same standard dominant caste students in the main building were made to sit in a separate shed along with the first standard depressed class students.¹³ In the colleges also admission was denied to the depressed classes students. Vellingiri depressed classes student was denied admission into the Coimbatore Government College when he sought admission on 09 June 1925.¹⁴ In some cases the caste-Hindus imposed fine on Adi-Dravidas those who sent their children to school.¹⁵ School teachers, school inspectors and other officials also practiced untouchability against the depressed classes' students. Even during inspection in the schools meant for depressed classes the Inspectors practiced untouchability. They inspected the depressed classes' students outside the school premises due to the fear of pollution.

Difficulties in Separate Schools

Regarding education of the depressed classes' children there were two kinds of opinion among the depressed classes' leaders such as demand for separate schools and abolition of separate schools. The denial of admission, separate seating and class arrangements and other forms of untouchability practice in school premises forced the leaders to think about the separate schools. Thus they themselves established separate schools for depressed classes children. But in due course students those who were studied in the separate schools could not continue their studies due to the denial of admission in public high schools. Thus the leaders appealed the government to take necessary steps to admit the depressed class students in public schools instead of establishing separate schools for them. Some depressed class leaders opposed the formation of separate schools because most of these schools had only one teacher with low qualification compared with the public school teachers. Hence the students could not go to higher education (above 5th standard). As per the report on Chingleput Primary Education (1929-1930) there were 253 Adi-Dravida schools run by Labour Department and Local Boards almost all were established in 1919. Even after the completion of 10 years, only 866 students were studying in 4th and 5th standard.¹⁸

Voice of Leaders

In the Legislative Council number of times they voiced against the denial of admission and practice of untouchability on the depressed classes children in schools. In 1924 M.C.Rajah and Rettaimalai Sreenivasan gave evidences before the Lee

Commission regarding the admission of depressed classes into schools. They also brought to the notice of the government regarding the disability of depressed classes to enter into schools. R. Srinivasan quoted some instances. In that cases he clearly mentioned that if the depressed classes' boys were admitted into schools by headmasters the caste people would make a hue and cry and threatened the boys to leave the schools. In some cases the dominant castes' students did not give place to them. Further, they requested that by the award of scholarships to the depressed class boys and by the stoppage of grants to those institutions which do not admit these boys, the object in view may be secured.¹⁹

Government Response

With a view to remove some of the obstacles in the way of the admission of depressed classes' students under public management schools, the British government in an order again issued the following instructions:

- 1) That where a school under public management is situated in an Agraharam, chavadi or temple or other area from which Panchama children are excluded, steps should be taken to transfer the school to some locality to which all classes of the population have access;
- 2) That in cases where the private owner of a rented school building objects to Panchama children being admitted into it, steps should be taken to secure for the school some other building in respect of which this objection could not be raised; and
- 3) That no school building should hereafter be constructed out of public funds unless it is certified that it is in a locality accessible to all classes including Panchamas.²⁰

In order to stop the exclusion in educational institutions some provisions had been made under the Madras Elementary Act, 1920. According to this Act the grants should be withheld from private institutions which deny admission to any pupil merely on the ground of the caste or community to which he belongs. A rule of the Act made a condition that the building used for a school should be accessible to pupils of all castes and communities.²¹ In order to admit the depressed classes' children at public schools the government informed the local bodies that separate schools for depressed classes should not be opened and persistent efforts should be made to overcome the opposition of the dominant castes to the free admission of the children of depressed classes. The Commissioner of Labour in this regard said that "It has always been the policy of the Labour Department to open separate schools for Depressed Classes children only where there are no schools at all in the locality or where the existing Local Board or aided schools either are inaccessible to the Depressed Classes, although not inaccessible, resolutely refuse to admit Depressed Classes children".²²

CONCLUSION

After 1919, the British government gave much importance to the affairs of the depressed classes. But they followed the same separate system of dominant castes. Every measure taken by the British for the sake of depressed classes were enforced by means of these separate institutions. It was commenced from the establishment of separate department called Labour Department under the head of Commissioner of Labour especially for the upliftment of depressed classes. It provided much importance to the educational development of depressed classes. In order to educate especially the depressed class children it established separate schools, but most of them were primary schools. This separate school system did not shake the traditional caste system. At first because of the educational backwardness of depressed classes and the difficulties in accessing public schools, the leaders welcomed the effort of the British government establishing separate schools. But in due course the depressed class leaders realized the discrimination and isolation of depressed class children in educational institutions. As it was a great hindrance for the higher education of depressed class children the leaders pleaded admission of depressed class pupils in common schools and the abolition of separate schools.

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