

Socio-Economic Transformation: Depressed Classes in Colonial Tamil Nadu

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Socio-Economic Transformation: Depressed Classes in Colonial Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

The Depressed Classes of colonial Tamil Nadu, including untouchable castes, Aboriginal, Criminal, and Wandering Tribes, endured centuries of social exclusion, economic deprivation, and systemic discrimination. They were denied basic rights, segregated in public spaces, and subjected to humiliating social restrictions. Recognising their plight, early 20th-century reform movements such as the Justice Party, E.V. Ramaswamy's Self-Respect Movement, and the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh worked to dismantle caste hierarchies, promote education, and foster social equality. Concurrently, the Government of Madras, through the Labour Department, implemented initiatives including Co-operative Societies, house-site allotments, loans, and economic support for agriculture and cottage industries, along with legal measures like the Caste Disabilities Removal Act and the Madras Temple Entry Authorisation Act. While challenges remained, these combined efforts gradually enhanced literacy, economic stability, and social recognition for the Depressed Classes. The coordinated actions of reformers, government, and community organisations laid a strong foundation for the post-independence empowerment and socio-economic upliftment of marginalised communities in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Depressed Classes, colonial Tamil Nadu, untouchability, social exclusion, economic upliftment, caste discrimination, Justice Party, Self-Respect Movement, Harijan Sevak Sangh, Labour Department, Co-operative Societies, house-site allotments, Caste Disabilities Removal Act, Madras Temple Entry Authorisation Act, social reform.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Earl of Winterton, the English Reformer in India, he distinctly remarked about the condition of the Depressed Classes and that they would be redeemed from slavery lasting over a period of two thousand years (Rajah, M. C, 1925). Further, he highlights their condition and the need for great attention. Owing to their economic and social conditions, they were neglected in society in all aspects.

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For their elevation in the social order, many resolutions and demands were placed in the Imperial Legislative Council. The Imperial Legislative Council wanted to know the condition of the Depressed Classes in each Province. The Government of Madras had already taken initiative to uplift their life (Government of Madras, 1919). Through the Labour Department in 1920, an investigation was conducted on the condition of the Depressed Classes. The major constituents of the Depressed Classes were the untouchable castes, and Aboriginal, Criminal and Wandering Tribes. They availed of all the benefits rendered by the yeoman services of the Labour Department and the Commissioner of Labour. While tracing the origin of Aboriginal Tribes, it was felt necessary to expose a flood of light on the Vettuvar, Villiyar, Irular and Pallar in the Tamil Sangam Works as the descendants of the pre-Tamils belonging to the proto-austroloid or Negroid stock. Perhaps the Tudiar, Panar, Parayar and Kondambar also belonged to the class of original tribes (Pillay, K.K., 1979). Despite all the merits of the indigenous people, they were not treated equally with the High-Caste Hindu communities. Their social strata were an eyesore to the orthodox Hindus. In Madras, during the early part of the 20th century, the social activities rendered by the Justice Party were a death knell to the monopoly of Brahmins in the public and Government service. The Justice Party fought for the 'equal opportunities for all and injustice to none'(Pillay, K.K., 1979). To revive the society and to free the caste chains in the public, to avert the feeling of untouchability and to wrest the Brahmin Supremacy, a staunch movement was founded by the social revolutionary and its leader E.V. Ramaswamy. This was known as the Self-Respect Movement.

Hence, the society consisted of filthy things like untouchability, socially wounding the Harijans. Many irrational restrictions and social disabilities had been imposed. For instance, the untouchables were forbidden to cover the upper part of their body except the waist (Wilson, n.d.). This social humiliation was not only for the males but also for the females. Until 1865, women were obliged by law to go with the upper part of their bodies, if they belonged to the Ilavan, Paraiya or other Depressed Castes (Madras Census, 1891).

The complex body of the Tamil Society varied in religion, caste, colour and creed. These diversified communities, believed and acquired traditional customs or immoral codes of the caste Hindus, lighting, and spread as the epidemic and endemic diseases of the society. To set right immoral into moral harmony and secular conditions, the Central Government enacted a law to break the traditional faiths and customs. In 1850, the Caste Disabilities Removal Act was passed. The Act stated that a person does not forfeit his ordinary rights or property by loss of caste or change of religion.

Social Divisions

According to Manu, the Ancient Indian Lawgiver gave he grades the Hindu social order as the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Sudras. He did not say the word fifth Varna (Manu, n.d.). Yajurveda confirms, the Nishads were the fifth varna (Dutta, N. K. n.d.). Further, Manu stated that the low classes, like Antyas and Bahyas, who lived outside the villages near burial grounds, on mountains and in groves (Manu, n.d.). Their occupations were concerned with the execution of criminals, the disposal of unclaimed dead bodies and so forth (Manu, n.d.). Thus, Manu has clearly stated the social condition of the Depressed Classes. All the social disabilities of untouchability were a replica of the past. The evil phenomena of untouchability were considered a social ulcer in the integrated society. As stated by Manu, the low-class people were declared unfit for being absorbed even in the fifth varna (Manu. n.d.).

The Panchamas, or the fifth varna, has been steady without the periodic ups and downs exhibited by the Brahmin and non-Brahmin varna. This fifth group constituted 15 per cent of the population and seemed homogeneous because of the common disability of 'untouchability

remained a minority both in number and in socio-economic political status', (Saraswathi, S, 1974) The members of fifth varna who lived outside the village, had their own roads and wells, their own shops and hotels, their own barbers, washermen, deities and priest and their own burial grounds. This racial apartheid or social segregation kept them at the greatest physical, cultural and economic distance from the larger society of Caste Hindus (Saraswathi, S, 1974). In order to recognise them in society few organisations tried to elevate them in the social ladder, such as the Depressed Classes Mission Society of India, the Depressed Classes Elevation Society of South India. All the organisations achieved their part in improving the Depressed communities. For instance, the Madras Salt Loaders Society and the Perambur Coolies Society helped the labourers' upliftment (Government of Madras, 1919). Besides, the European Household Workers Union, Scavengers Union, Rickshaw Pullers Union and Weaving Workers Union strove for higher wages and leave benefits. These unions did not attend to all the problems of the Depressed Classes. Without the support of the Government, the private bodies found a handicap in getting the financial support. Day by day, the private association faded away. One or two unions echoed the grievances of the Depressed in vain. To accelerate their work, financial assistance was felt much important. At this juncture, M.C. Rajah, being a Labour Union Leader of the mill workers in Madras, supported in favour of the mill administration in 1919. The people of the Depressed Classes faced many problems and sufferings. Incidentally, communal disturbances also occurred at Pulianthope. The Government rendered all possible measures in the provision of house-sites (Government of Madras, 1928).

Social Upliftment

The untouchables among the Depressed Classes were the Harijans. They were not permitted to dine with other Caste Hindus in all the public places. By the looks and manners, the Harijans varied in nature and style from the orthodox Hindus. Since 1920, the Commissioner of Labour has received reports from the districts on social disabilities.

To avert the feeling of untouchability in the minds of pupils, combined or common schools were started in all districts. For instance, in North Arcot, South Arcot, Tanjore, Tiruchirapalli, Madurai and Ramnad. Merely, the opening of these schools did not result in a secularistic approach. The educational institutions imparted education on equality and fraternity. Besides, tolerance and social mobilisation were inculcated in the minds of the pupils.

Hence, the evil of casteism dominated the entire Hindu Society. On the part of the Government, possible steps were taken to remove the untouchability. At the outset, the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh worked extensively. This organisation was divided into 12 district branches, which had their own Presidents and Secretaries (Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1930). The Provincial Anti-Untouchability Conference was held at Tiruchirapalli, on 20th November, 1932, under the Presidentship of Dr T.S.S. Rajan (Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1930).

Mahatma Gandhi's speeches gave a new impetus to the movement. He said, "Unless and until we befriend the Harijan, unless and until we treat him as our brother, we cannot treat humanity as one brotherhood. The whole movement for the removal of untouchability is a movement for the establishment of universal brotherhood and nothing else". This reforming thought was taken as a caption by the Harijan Sevak Sangh (Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1935). Gandhi toured the Tamil districts twice with a group of 20 volunteers for the Harijan elevation in 1933-34 (Under Secretary Office, 1934). The important persons who accompanied him were Miss. Muriel Lister and Miss. Slade, Damodar Doss, Mr C. Rajagopalachari, Dr T.S.S. Rajan and Thakker Bapa. They wholeheartedly supported and fought against the evil of untouchability (Government of Madras, 1918). In their steps, persons like Babu Rajendra

Prasad, Thakkar Bepe, Rajagopalachari, Devadass Gandhi, G. Ramachandran, and S.S. Bharathi toured for the Depressed Classes social elevation.

The question of the amelioration of untouchability is a much larger problem than that of either Aboriginal or Criminal Tribes. They formed about 17 percent of the entire population of the Madras Presidency (Government of Madras, 1918). During the formation of the Labour Department, the condition of the untouchables was worse than anything else. In no less than six districts of the Presidency, more than one person in every five was practically not allowed to come within a distance of 64 feet of the Higher Castes without pollution (Commissioner of Labour, 1920).

To overcome these disabilities, education was used as the prime medium. Through the education, the young pupils' minds were convinced, and they recognised what racial discrimination is. To forget their differential ties, the private organisations such as the Theosophical Society, the Depressed Classes Mission, the South Indian Brahmo Samaj, the Poor School Society, the Social Service League, the Triplicane Sociological Brotherhood, and Royapettah worked for the social recognition of the Panchamas (Commissioner of Labour, 1920). Dr T.S.S. Rajan, as the President of Tamilnadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, from 1932 to 1935, worked for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes, especially to elevate the Scheduled Castes. The Sangh and the social reformers like Rajendra Prasad and Thakkar Bapa toured in the Tamil districts with the intention of removing untouchability. Besides, they held Conferences for the temple entry. Referendum conducted at Madurai, Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram and Srirangam.

During this period, the primary to higher-level educational institutions were against untouchability. In 1925, the Madras Provincial Anti-Untouchability Meeting was conducted under the Presidentship of Venkatarathinam Naidu, Vice-Chancellor of the Madras University. Dr A. L. Mudaliar was a member of the reception committee (Indian Social Reformer, 1925). From the primary school to the higher educational institutions, they imparted the necessity for a caste free society. Through the Labour Department, strenuous actions were taken for the removal of untouchability. The meetings and lectures on the equality fraternity yielded little attention in the pupils' minds. Hence, the caste evil was not fully ousted. Its bad remnants showed a bad face in society. All the private, public and Government measures helped in the averting of untouchability. To spread the ideals of humanity and to fight against the evil of untouchability, propaganda measures on casteless society were conducted in the village, district and the Provincial levels. During 1933, 3,000 people belonging to the untouchables attended the Conference at Shiyali in Tanjore District.

In education, the pupils availed the facilities of Scholarships and accommodation in hostels for their regular study. Other than the mid-day meals, the hostels helped in total to improve the strength of the students in the schools and for further studies.

On the social side, the Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1937 started a model colony at Korattadipalayam, Pudur. Here, they provided the Harijans with terraced houses, with separate kitchen enclosures (Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1938). In all the spheres of human activities, casteism showed its ugly face as a chameleon. By the Harijan Sangh, the Harijan Utsav was celebrated from 24th September to 2nd October every year.

Historically, on 24th September, the Poona Pact was signed, and on 26th September, it was ratified. Within these nine days. Harijan day was celebrated every 30th day of every month in a year (Jagadisan, T. N., & Shamial (Comps.), 1949). These days were celebrated in each village, taluk and the district level to promote amicable contact between the untouchables and the Caste Hindus.

In short, the Tamilnadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, the Labour Department and the Government had taken major spade works for the social elevation of the Depressed Classes and for the Scheduled Castes. When comparing the services of the private organisation, the Seva Sangh's contribution was a unique adventure in the reformation of the Depressed Classes. The Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak was not narrow-minded. The Sangh had worked for its two targets, the benevolent works for the social upliftment of the Depressed Classes. The other one was that of converting the hearts of the Caste Hindus. As the major task was carried on in convincing the orthodox minds of the recognition of the Harijans in the society (Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, 1947). The Sangh worked for the elevation of the touchable communities also.

Elevation measures for the Aborigines and Tribes

Many works were taken for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. In 1920, the Labour Department tried to strengthen the social and economic life of the Depressed Classes. During the period of the 1920's there was no political or administrative recognition of a border line between the touchable and untouchable, constituting the Depressed Classes (Saraswathi, S, 1974). Through the Communal G.O. of 1922, one seat was given to the "Depressed Classes" and "Others". Other indicating in the sense of all the communities not given separate turns in the order (Saraswathi, S, 1974).

To streamline their divisions and to avail all the benefits from the public, private organisations and the Government's welfare activities, a list was prepared in 1930. The list was registered 35 untouchable castes, 24 Criminal Tribes and 35 Aboriginal and Hill Tribes (Government of Madras, 1930). In the next year, the same list was altered, and 35 Hill and Aboriginal In the next Tribes and 82 others were listed (Government of Madras, 1931). To elevate them, the amelioration work was taken by the Labour Department. The preparation of the list was the major step to know those who were Depressed economically, whether they were touchable or not. Dr Ambedkar and Mr R. Srinivasan tried and protest the rights and privileges of the Depressed Classes. They worked in favour of the elevation of civil rights, protection against discrimination, adequate representation in the Legislature and the services, redress against pre-judicial action and neglect of interest representation in the Cabinet and special care to the Depressed Classes (Saraswathi, S, 1974). The prominent Aborigines and the Hill Tribes in the Madras Presidency were the Badagas, Paniyans, Kotas and the Todas in Nilgiri District, Palaiyars (Puliyans) in Coimbatore and Madura Districts, Malasars, Sholagars, and Mudugars in Coimbatore District (Commissioner of Labour, 1920). Even though they were under their Tribes list, their social status was below. For instance, food, dress and accommodation were entirely different from the civilised people. As the forestry-abodes, their lives and professions were indefinite. Most of the year, they were in disguised unemployment. In the district, the Tribes like Todas lived in the hills. When comparing them with the Irulars, Paniyars and Kurumbas, their economic status varied. Hence, the tribes belonged to the Lingayastes group. The Kotas and Aboriginal Tribes were carrion eaters. This resulted in considering them as the untouchables (Commissioner of Labour, 1920). The Todas were marginal in number in the district. The Kurumbas and Irulas were the shyest of the Tribes on these Hills and had less contact with civilised life (Commissioner of Labour, 1920). Like the Nilgiris District, the Tribes who lived in other districts varied in their physical features and in their accustomed life. All of them were very keen on their traditional professions like hunting, cattle breeding and some of them were involved in agriculture. After the formation of the Labour Department, the Tribes' elevation measures were introduced under the Co-operative Societies. Through these societies, they were elevated to the equal footing of other Backward communities. Hence, a few communities were not fully developed in their socio-economic life. For instance, the Malayalis'

socio-economic life was not changed. As the Revenue Officer, Mr R.M. Sundaram, the Collector of Salem, tried to improve their condition in social and economic matters (Government of Madras, 1940).

In 1947, the Tribes' socio-economic upliftment was carried out by the Harijan Welfare Department. Notwithstanding, exhaustive steps were taken for the Tribes, their social recognition by the Caste Hindus was very less. Finally, through the Adi-Dravida and Tribal Welfare Department, major amelioration was implemented for the Tribes to be equal to that of the Scheduled Castes.

The Criminal Tribes

They were socially disregarded and economically weaker sections. The major communities under this head were Vayalpad in Salem, Veppur Pariyas in South Trichinopoly, South Arcot, and Chengleput. North Arcot and Salem, Gandharvakottai, Koravas in Tanjore, Vanganganur, Pariyars in North Arcot and Chingleput (Commissioner of Labour, 1920). With them few Tribes were also registered under the Criminal Tribes Act. By the implementation of the Act, Killagudi Kallas in Madura. Vellayan Kuppam Padayachis in South Arcot, Kuttapal Kallas in Trichinopoly and Tanjore and Twenty-one Sections of Valayas in Coimbatore were enlisted as the Criminal Tribes (Government of Madras, 1919). For the understanding and to take possible measures for the socio-economic elevation, the Tribes list was used and identified by the Government for the special concessions and privileges. These new Tribes were not considered as Criminals. To identify their economic condition, they were listed under the Tribes. Some of the Kallars in Madura were the hereditary culprits. In the same district, the Kallars of Melur, as a body, had forsworn theft in a registered document and, as a body, had fairly kept this oath, whereas their fellow caste men south of the Vaigai refused to restrain their propensity to steal (Government of Madras, 1919). Few people in the Valaiyas of Coimbatore were addicted to crime. Parayans were generally a most honest set of Depressed people, but the Veppur Parayans and Vaniyan Parayans had taken largely to crime (Commissioner of Labour, 1920).

The above-cited facts represent the plight of the Depressed Classes. Among them few sects or groups were slightly freed from their usual life. With the formation of the Labour Department, the whole Depressed Classes were rising upwards in their life and culture. To restrain and sustain their social condition, the Caste Hindus also voluntarily recognised them as one in the society.

Despite all the social measures, the backbone of their life rested in the job where they worked. To reconstruct their economic standard as affluent, beneficial measures were taken, and provision of necessary amenities like food, dress and houses were awarded in a piecemeal way.

Economic Upliftment

In the entire society, the people's economic status varied in nature with their lives, as the poor or the rich. Without wealth, anyone could hardly survive in society. From antiquity, the Panchamas or allied group of the Depressed Classes lived below the poverty line. They were under the threat of starvation. They mostly worked as coolies in society. They were devoid of wealth; for instance, the Panchamas or the Harijans were the landless lot. Succeedingly, the other minor groups were like the Aboriginal and Hill Tribes, and the Criminal Tribes. After a thorough study of their economic condition, the Labour Department and the Government of Madras jointly carried out many measures to improve their economic status.

Generally, the Government was interested in averting inequality in all aspects. To elevate them in society. A stable economy was needed. Providing financial assistance or accommodating them in the newly built houses and imparting education were of crucial importance in all periods in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Government tried to elevate their economic status with ameliorative works. For their upliftment, private organisations like the Christian Mission, Special Services League, Depressed Class Mission and Young Men's Christian Association tried to help the Depressed Classes (Government of Madras, 1920). Hence, their services rendered were not equal for all the communities of the Depressed Class.

The Government tried to strengthen their economic standard. The Government started co-operative societies for the Depressed communities. In 1904, a Co-operative Law was passed, and in the same year, the Co-operative Society was started for the elevation of the Depressed Classes (Hough, E. M, 1960). Before the creation of the Labour Department, the first Co-operative Society was formed in Tanjore in 1916(Government of Madras, 1916). In 1918, there were 53 Co-operative Societies which functioned in the province, of which 42 were for agricultural purposes (Government of Madras, 1916). The main objectives of the Co-operative Societies were as follows:

- (1) To obtain loans for the acquisition of house-sites.
- (2) For agricultural purposes, such as the purchase of cattle, ploughs, seeds, etc.
- (3) For flood relief,
- (4) For credit purposes, and
- (5) To obtain a lease or assignment of lands from the Government.

With these objectives, all kinds of Co-operative Societies were working for the upliftment of the Depressed communities. In the above-stated three objectives were financed by the Government. All the credit societies were financed by private banks. For instance, the Madras Christian Central Co-operative Bank of George Town, Madras (Mohan, P. E, 1993). This bank rendered service to the untouchables and the touchables. Being a private financial bank, its contribution was great for the Depressed Classes. From 1922 to 1927, the bank had given loans for the amelioration work as listed below (Government of Madras, 1928):

Years	Total Loan (Rs.)	Principal Overdue (Rs.)	Interest Overdue (Rs.)
1922-23	6,26,932	45,243	1,782
1923-24	8,10,148	66,823	2,474
1924-25	10,56,008	98,846	3,854
1925-26	10,26,073	1,62,213	5,634
1926-27	11,19,551	2,32,944	11,595

The loan facility was availed by all the people belonging to the Depressed communities. Gradually, a large number of members did not pay their loans. Due to heavy dues, maintenance, and the collection of loan amounts, it hardly resulted favourably for the banks. The Co-operative Bank decided and reported to the Government for the special officer to supervise the whole affairs of loans and the payment of money for the same. In this matter, meticulous care was taken by the Government. For a stable administration, the Labour Department assisted the financial bank with the foolproof measures of posting a Deputy Registrar to the Co-operative Bank and the Society. In 1929, the Commissioner of Labour was appointed as a special Deputy Registrar with the Inspectors and Clerks (Government of Madras, 1928). For the supervision of the people who were given loans, supervising staff were deputed for the collection of arrears. In the appointment of various posts, M.C. Rajah and Veerian raised questions in the Legislative Assembly to secure the appointment of the Depressed Classes in the Co-operative Societies.

In 1919, 14,000 were members in 233 Co-operative Societies. For the Welfare of the Scheduled Castes, 118 Co-operative Societies out of 233 were functioning. The untouchability was the main reason for the segregated societies (Government of Madras, 1920). For the smooth running of the Co-operative functions, special societies were assigned for the Depressed communities. In 1920, over 14,600 members belonged to the Depressed communities in the Co-operative Societies, roughly three times the number which existed five years ago (Rushbrook, W, 1921). Through the Co-operative Societies, house-sites were distributed in Tanjore District. It was decided to give them later, the house-sites were provided to all the districts for the Depressed Classes, in all instalment basis for 19 years instead of 10 years, so as to make repayment easy (Government of Madras, 1921). In all societies, the people's welfare was the prime motto. By the Co-operative Societies, the members got a right in the administration who had technical knowledge in various fields. For the learning of co-operative administration, special lectures, coaching and the provision of benefits to the members were highlighted. Irrespective of the members, welfare measures were given.

The Co-operative Societies were not only formed for the untouchables, but also for the Aborigines and Criminal Tribes. According to the Constitution of India, Article 46, it has been specifically laid down that Provinces should promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Gafoor, S.K.A., 1951). As a corollary to the provision, the Labour Department concentrated on the interests of the Aboriginal and Hill Tribes and the Criminal Tribes. For them, varied Co-operative Societies were formed. For instance, for the reclamation of Kallars and the fishermen, societies were formed. In this, except for the Panchama societies, they also helped with the rehabilitation of the Kallars and other Criminal Tribes. To strengthen and to indulge them in the works other than agriculture, carpentry making, handicrafts and for bees-keeping and the Milk Co-operative Societies were started in the respective regions.

The progress of the Co-operative Societies for the Depressed Classes is listed below (Hough, E. M, 1960):

Year	Number of Societies for the Depressed Classes
Before 1923	381
1923	601
1925–26	1,171
1930–31	1,808
1935–36	2,713
1940–41	2,163
1949–50	2,679

The voluminous progress in starting societies and serving the Depressed people was considered the first step for the elevation of the Depressed Classes. By starting societies alone, it did not sustain the economy of the people. Besides, the societies asserted a life-giving measure and guaranteed them to engage in any activity through the society. In 1931, the proposal was passed and explained that for efficient administration, the Co-operative Societies were going to be freed from the clutches of the Labour Department. As per the decision, the real transfer began on 1st June, 1932(Government of Madras, 1939). For the transfer, as the Legislator, M.C. Rajah opposed this step. Besides, the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha passed the resolution for the re-transfer of the societies to the same authority. The Sabha had demanded the transfer of control back to the Commissioner of Labour and to increase the pay scale of the clerks and inspectors of the Society (Government of Madras, 1924). Finally, in 1949-1950, the policy of separate societies for the Scheduled Castes was not encouraged. But the general societies were started and functioned for the whole Depressed communities, and sometimes, a few societies were started for the Backward communities.

Amelioration work

For the betterment in life of the Depressed Classes, the Labour Department and the Government tried and implemented many works. Especially, the Panchamas or the Scheduled Castes development was highly considered. For the basic needs like food, dress and a house, the people underwent difficulties in living. To change their life in the co-existence of others, lands, house-sites, pathways, drainages, and burial grounds were provided. For these activities, annual funds were sanctioned under different heads. Besides, with the outburst of natural occurrences like the floods, relief measures were taken. During the floods in the districts of Tiruchirapalli, Tanjore and Madras City Government took sufficient relief measures to restore the people (Government of Madras, 1931).

Many people who belonged to the Depressed Classes lived homeless. To fill their needs, a large number of Ryotwari lands, uncultivable lands under the Government for miscellaneous purposes, were proposed to allot the lands to the different communities at different times. For the allotment of lands or even to house-sites, financial allocation was a much important feature. The Government did its best in the allocation of funds. In 1923, Other than House sites, one lakh rupees was allotted for pathways, burial grounds and wells (Government of Madras, 1931). The people belonging to the Harijans were disregarded by the High Caste Hindus. To avoid the Caste stricken issues, amicable housing settlements were provided with the available

amenities. All the arrested social evils were clubbed in one form as the untouchables. To make a liberal mood in the minds of people, house-sites were allotted irrespective of all communities. Slowly, the expected result of mingled houses was built in later days. A sum of Rs 3,25,000 was separately provided under 'loans' for the acquisition of house-sites in 1922(Government of Madras, 1924). Subsequently, in 1923-1924, for the acquisition of lands, a sum of Rs. 4,75,000 was provided as loans (Government of Madras, 1925). During the year, the sanctioned amount was not spent towards the acquisition of land. The reasons were due to the delay of the sanctioned sum, with different amendments to the laws.

To get the lands from the public, the property rights ship rested in the Land Acquisition Amendment Act, which came into force on 1 January 1924(Government of Madras, 1925). The acquisition of land before the assignment faced certain hurdles created by the Mirasdaras, who filed Civil Cases to stop them. To reverse their stay, the Sub-Judge gave a decision in favour of the Government, and the work went on smoothly (Government of Madras, 1924).

In 1927, for amelioration work, a sum of Rs 4 lakhs was allotted for the Depressed Classes (Government of Madras, 1931). The outbreak of the Second World War and its effects led to the financial crisis of the Government. To balance the Government measures in all, especially for the welfare schemes, an adjustment allocation of Rs 1 lakh was sanctioned for the Depressed Classes in 1945(Mohan, P. E, 1993). Again, the allotted sum reached Rs 3 lakhs in 1946-1947(Government of Madras, 1948). In short, during the period from 1920 to 1947, allocation of finance and the assignment of lands to the Depressed Classes were progressive in a dwindled style.

House-sites

Since 1920, the Department of Labour has persistently claimed the amenities of the Depressed Classes. Development measures in education and economics were annually taken. The Commissioner of Labour visited personally, sometimes along with the company of the respective district Tahsildars and other land survey staff. Their tour or visit to the District of Tanjore, later to other districts, resulted in the spade works for the elevation of the Depressed Classes. In the Legislative Council also a resolution was also passed to show the lands for communal purposes separately (Government of Madras, 1925). The measures of allotting land for the untouchables were started from 1918 in all the villages. For the land allotment, waste lands, fasli with the chitta and adangal statements were taken for consideration. Exceptionally, the lands under cultivation, the rest of the lands, with the expectation of considerable infrastructure facilities few places were chosen and given to the Depressed Classes. For the allocation of house-sites, initial deposits were collected from the applicants, and then the Government incurred to a certain extent. Any assignment, either directly or through the medium of Co-operative Societies, organised for the purpose through which the assignment was made (Government of Madras, 1931). The Department of Labour made the work of house-sites very easy in acquisition, and the same for the allottees. Through the two kinds of advances, like (1) advances made directly to individual applicants, and (2) by the Co-operative Societies. Usually, for the cost of land, money was collected from the allottees. For their convenience annual instalment was allowed. If the defaulters increased in delay payment of 10 percent interest was collected (Government of Madras, 1928).

Due to the financial crisis, in 1934-1935, the provision of house-sites was deferred; subsequently, in 1935-1936, the house-sites were provided for those who made full payment. Irrespective of the communities in the Depressed list, the cost of a house-site was fixed in new aspects; half of the charge of the acquired lands was paid by the receivers. The cost of acquisition was subject to a maximum of Rs 350 for wet lands and Rs 150 per acre for dry

lands in 1940(Government of Madras, 1942). During the period from 1920-1947, possible changes were introduced in the provision of house-sites to the Depressed Classes and to the Scheduled Castes. All the districts benefited from the Reports of the District Labour Officer. In 1947, in allotment of a house-site, 10 cents of land was demanded by the members in the Legislation in the Province. This demand did not materialise (Government of Madras, 1947).

Thus, the above-stated house-sites were provided to the eligible communities on the basis of the recommendation by the District Labour Officer through the District Collectors (Government of Madras, 1947).

The Labour Department gave special consideration to the Panchamas. During the year 1927-1928, a sum of Rs 15 lakhs was incurred for the allotment of house-sites, more than Rs 18 lakhs during 1920-1931(Boag, G. T. S. n.d.). To add to this, after a decade, a total of 45,711 house-sites were provided from the Government for the Scheduled Castes (Government of Madras, 1943). Later on, by the Harijan Welfare Department, 43,500 house-sites were provided from the Government lands (Government of Madras, 1947). With the availed house-sites, the Depressed Classes settled in their residential houses. For the construction of buildings, the individual's responsibilities were more than the Government assistance. With the Scheduled Castes, other Depressed divisions like Aborigines, Hill Tribes and Criminal Tribes also benefited from the allotted house-sites in the respective regions.

Generally, the Depressed Classes lacked employment opportunities. For their regular income, the Department of Labour tried and introduce many schemes through the Co-operative Societies. The societies functioned for the various communities for the varied purposes of elevation. One of the resources to earn money was the adoption of agriculture. This cultivation always resembled a dismal figure to the agriculturists. The tribes on the Hills and the Criminal Tribes were in smaller numbers holding cultivation. For the improvement in agriculture, the Government freely awarded seeds, oxen, the plough-share and other necessary equipment for the cultivation (Government of Madras, 1938). The object of reforming the Criminal Tribes a settled life. To enliven all the Tribes, effective measures in the appointments were taken. Cottage industries were also encouraged by the Labour Department. For the Hill Tribes, work like spinning, weaving, button making, coir-making, and mat-making. Bee-keeping was encouraged. By 1947, a stable economy of the Depressed Classes was much felt (Harijan Welfare Department, 1948).

The above-mentioned feature on the Socio-Economic Upliftment confirms the amelioration work done by the Government through the Labour Department and the Commissioner of Labour. To protect the civil rights of the Depressed. In 1938 and 1947, the Civil Disabilities Acts were passed. These Acts gave a warning to the communal riots and diversities in the name of caste, class and colour. Through the Act, the evil of untouchability was averted to a certain extent. Besides, the Madras Temple Entry Authorisation Act, 1947, helped with the temple entry of the untouchables (Harijan Welfare Department, 1948). After 1947, through the Harijan Welfare Department, all the socio-economic welfare measures were carried out for the restoration of the Scheduled Castes and other Depressed communities.

CONCLUSION

The upliftment of the Depressed Classes in colonial Tamil Nadu reflects a remarkable journey of resilience, reform, and social transformation. For centuries, communities like the untouchables, Aboriginal, Criminal, and Wandering Tribes faced deep-rooted discrimination, social exclusion, and economic hardship. Through the combined efforts of reformers, government initiatives, and community organisations, meaningful progress was made in education, employment, housing, and civic participation. Leaders such as E.V. Ramaswamy

and M.C. Rajah, along with organisations like the Tamil Nadu Harijan Sevak Sangh, played a vital role in challenging caste hierarchies and advocating for equality and dignity.

Although inequalities persisted, these efforts laid a strong foundation for post-independence empowerment. Legal protections, social reforms, and economic opportunities gradually integrated marginalised communities into mainstream society. The journey of the Depressed Classes serves as a powerful reminder that social justice, sustained action, and collective responsibility are essential to building a truly inclusive and equitable society.

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