

ROLE OF DALIT INTELLECTUALS IN TRANSFORMING TAMIL SOCIETY

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Abstract

Several Dalit intellectuals started to emerge and uplift their community in society and made a proletarian representation in state politics. This becomes a landmark change in the history of the Dalit community and a progressive stand in Tamil Nadu. The social reformation and political empowerment born through this intellectual class narrowed the social stratification lines between various castes. Predominant among them was Ayothi Thass Pandita who was instrumental in spreading a distinct Dalit sensibility and consciousness. It is generally observed that Tamil Dalit writing which was conspicuous during the period of Pandita in the early years of the twentieth century failed to sustain its drive into the middle years. The dormancy in Tamil Dalit writing is attributed to the alignment of Tamil Dalits with the various political and social movements between the 1930s and 1970s until they regained a distinct voice in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Political leaders like M.C Raja and Sivasanmugam Pillai represented their community concerns in the state assemblies which led to the development of laws that legally protected the rights of the community. The contribution of other Dalit leaders like Rettamalai Srinivasan, Pumani, and M.C Chinnathambi Pillai are indispensable in uplifting the Adi-Dravida community, eradicating Caste suppression, Untouchability and ensuring the civil rights of the community. John Rathinam and Meenambal Sivaraj made possible Dalit education in society. From the perspective of Historical sources and sociological analysis contribution of Viramma, a Tamil Dalit woman is significant. It was the only source in the modern history of Tamilnadu that deeply picturizes the hardships faced by Dalit women in society. This research paper aims to picture the contributions of the Dalit Intellectuals and their impacts on Tamil society.

Keywords: Dalits, Adi-Dravida, Untouchability, Panchamas, Depressed classes, Pariahs and Harijans.

INTRODUCTION:

Throughout history, the so-called Dalits or Harijans were subjected to socio-economic and political suppression by Orthodox religious sections and High caste people. The rise in the political voice and expression of the Dalit community during Madras presidency during the 19th century made significant impacts on the social and political history of Madras presidency. The Non-Brahmin movement made positive consequences only with a certain group and practically it failed to induct the rights of the Dalit community. They were deprived of basic civil rights and treated as slaves by several Indian communities. Their standard of life had a betterment with British rules which aimed at the abolition of untouchability. They were not working to the upliftment of untouchables and marginalized people. Several Dalit intellectuals started to emerge and started to uplift their community in society and proletarian representation in state politics. This becomes a landmark change in the history of the Dalit community and a progressive stand in Tamil Nadu. The social reformation and political empowerment born through this intellectual class narrowed the social stratification lines between various castes. Predominant among them was Ayothidass Pandita who was instrumental in spreading a distinct Dalit sensibility and consciousness. It is generally observed that Tamil Dalit writing which was conspicuous during the period of Panditha in the early years of the twentieth century failed to sustain its drive in the middle years. The dormancy in Tamil Dalit writing is attributed to the alignment of Tamil Dalits with the various political and social movements between the 1930s and 1970s until they regained a distinct voice in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Political leaders like M.C Raja and Sivasanmugam Pillai represented their community concerns in the state assemblies which led to the development of laws that legally protected the rights of the community. The contribution of other Dalit leaders like Rettamalai Srinivasan, Pumani, and M.C Chinnathambi Pillai are indispensable in uplifting the Adi-Dravida community, eradicating Caste suppression and Untouchability and ensuring the civil rights of the community. John Rathinam and Meenambal Sivaraj made possible Dalit education in society. From the perspective of Historical sources and sociological analysis contribution of Viramma, a Tamil Dalit woman is wonderful. It was the only source in the modern history of Tamil Nadu that deeply picturizes the hardships faced by Dalit women in society. Thus, the contribution of these personalities constructed the roots for destroying the caste social stigma in Tamil Nadu.

THE STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY:

Panchama intellectuals were particularly sensitive to the caste politics that underpinned all nationalist and social-reform endeavors, and they were actively involved in political and social reform activities aimed at uplifting their community. In contrast to this their quest for an egalitarian identity among other communities, they develop a strong political representation and social liberty¹.

Modernity's egalitarian tenets helped Dalits, who up until that point had been social outcasts, rise to prominence. Even in pre-modern societies, the marginalized groups were never inert according to G. Aloysius, but in the new context of modernity, they actively engaged in challenging hegemonic traditions and practices. To aid in the empowerment and liberation of their social groups, many castes categorized as "Depressed Classes" during the colonial era came together to develop a single caste identity. The development of primary education and

public employment reservation made separate identity and subjectivity for the Tamil untouchables in Tamil Nadu during the later decades of the nineteenth century, when modernism took on a significant relevance for the Depressed classes².

Ayothi Thass Panditha fought for the rights of the untouchable populations and made a clear objection to Manu dharmic Brahminism. Most crucially, he urged that Tamil Nadu's "untouchable groups" refer to themselves as Panchamars, or members of the fifth caste, and become a great inspiration for Ambedkar³.

In Tamil Nadu, the Depressed classes were generally called Pariahs, Valluvans, Pallas, and Chakkiliyans and this made several discriminations by degrading their identity and pulling down their opportunity in society⁴. This became a cause of several depressed class movements on framing their community as a population born to do reserved jobs.

A large gathering of Adi-Dravida was organized to support the motion that G.A. Natesan had submitted to the Madras Corporation in 1920 to rename "Panchama" as "Adi-Dravida."⁵The term "Adi-Dravida" began to be used in Madras Corporation documents around 1920.

Although the name "Adi-Dravida" was frequently used to refer to Tamil Nadu's Untouchables, it was not used in official records after 1920. As a result of the coordinated efforts made by M.C. Rajah, a leader of the Depressed Classes, the name of the Depressed Classes was changed to Adi Dravida from Pariahs or Panchamas⁶.

M.C. Rajah, objected vehemently, stating that "Harijan - Meaning Children of God" refers to all Hindus and is therefore improper for the "Depressed Classes." Rajah argued that the castes in question had the right to choose a name for themselves and that no one else had the authority to do so⁷.

INFLUENCE AND IMPACT ON TAMIL POLITICS:

According to the census of 1917, one-seventh of the Indian population was in the community of the depressed class. Though they were considered socially backward their numbers made them politically significant. In Tamilnadu, both Congress and Dravidian politics didn't express justice for the community instead played fairly with game policies for vote banks⁸.

Caste and politics have been intertwined in Tamil Nadu from the beginning of representative politics. Despite the state's proud history of anti-caste rebellion, one can make a good case that caste has always affected Tamil politics⁹. Partly as a result of this, autonomous Dalit mobilization receded into humble beginnings between Independence and the late 1980s, as Dalits were asserting a claim for political parity.

Lower caste members attempted to achieve equality in the 19th century. Ayothi Thass, a Dalit philosopher who was a devout Buddhist, advocated for the right to education (1845–1914) and inspired the non-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu. Ayothi Thass started the Tamizhan weekly in 1907, and he continued to publish articles to it about indigenous medicines, conversion, untouchability, and caste dominance until he died in 1914¹⁰.

In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, the emergence of Dalit organizations to urge for more reform and the beginnings of official acknowledgment and response

accelerated¹¹. The early 1890s saw the formation of organizations such as the Dravida Mahajana Sangha (Dravidian People Association), which was created in 1891 by Ayothi Thass.

There were many journals published by Dalits in Madras Presidency, like *Suryodayam* by Munusamy (1869) was the first Dalit journal published in 1869, *Panchama* (1871), *Sugir Tavasani* (1877), *Dravida Pandiyan* by John Rathinam (1885), *Aandror Mitran* (1886), *Mahavikata Tuthan* (1888), *Parayan* by Srinivasan (1893), *Oru Paise Tamilan* by Ayothi Thass (1903) *Tamil Pen* by Swapneswari Ammal (1916). These Journals become a prime tool for criticizing the offensive policies of the government towards the Dalit community¹².

In 1891, Rettaimalai Srinivasan founded the Paraiyar Mahajana Sabha, which had branches throughout Tamil Nadu. Enlightened leaders from both the Untouchables and the caste Hindus were invited to the Sabha and presented seminars. He started associating with the "Adi- Dravida Mahajana Sabha" in 1892. He organized a Scheduled Castes Conference at Royyapettah Wesley High School in 1893. He proclaimed an open assault on the caste system, religion, and the seventh untouchability in his sharp speech to the convention. He had organized a second Dalit summit for October 1895 at Victoria Hall in Madras. Srinivasan not only concentrated on the issues facing Dalits but also made recommendations on how to address them. He also occupied an important post in the Justice Party. A pivotal moment in the Indian National Movement was the Round Table Conference¹³.

In 1892, John Rathinam, a Dalit leader started Dravid Kazhagam in Madras as a symbol of Non- the Brahmin movement but later it lost its influence because of the renaming of South Indian Liberal Federation into Dravidar Kazhagam in 1944 by E.V Ramaswamy Naicker¹⁴.

At the round table conference, every significant political party, organization, and community had an opportunity to be represented. Along with Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mr. Srinivasan was successful in persuading other members of Parliament and the Prime Minister of England to support special voting rights for Dalits¹⁵.

In 1916, M.C. Rajah was secretary of the Adi-Dravida Mahajan Sabha, and since 1928, he has presided over the All-India Depressed Classes Association. M.C.R was fortunate to be able to attend school. He was a teacher-trainer at Teacher Training College Saypet and a lecturer at Voorhees College in Vellore. M.C.R was elected as a member of the Madras Legislative Council on behalf of the Justice Party¹⁶. He was also the Deputy Leader of the South Indian Liberal Federation in the Council; Vice-President of the Hindu Mahasabha; President of the Madras Temple Entry Sangam; Secretary of the Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha, 1916; and President of the All-India Depressed Classes Association, in M.C.R., a nominated Dalit Member in the Madras Legislative Council and later in the Central Assembly pioneered the cause of the depressed classes.

He established a school and worked to educate the Dalit community. To assert political rights for Dalit society, he led the Adi Dravida Mahajana Sangam, which brought the educational environment and poverty of Dalits to the notice of the British government, resulting in many special concessions for their education and social welfare¹⁷.

By the efforts of Srinivasan, The Hindu Religious Endowment Act of 1926 was amended, thus on November 1st, 1932, P. Subbarayan, the First Minister of the Madras Presidency, filed his bill, the Temple Entry Disabilities Bill, in the Madras Legislative

Council¹⁸. The Council advised the Government that they might be happy to acknowledge the strong and growing public sentiment in the Hindu Community that the disabilities either to be imposed by usage on certain classes of the Community regarding social interaction and communal worship at temples should be removed and justice rendered to them.

Annai Meenambal Sivaraj, the first Dalit woman leader, is a pivotal person in Indian Dalit history and the fight for the inclusion of Dalit women at the national level. Meenambal's first public engagement with the caste issue occurred in 1928 when she delivered a speech in support of the Simon Commission. In contrast to the higher caste leaders of the time, who boycotted the commission because it did not represent Indian interests by excluding them, she made an appeal to the Commission for the recognition and execution of affirmative action for Dalits¹⁹.

She participated with Dr. Ambedkar and E.V.R Ramasamy in propagating Dalit consciousness and the anti-caste revolution message in Tamil Nadu. Meenambal was the first Scheduled Caste woman to be elected to the Madras Corporation as a member of the Madras University Senate. She was also the first Dalit woman to be elected President of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation²⁰.

SHATTERING OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION:

The Dalit community which is layered at bottom of the strata started to change its position in the early 20th century by interpreting the Brahmanical texts and conversion of people to Buddhism and Christianity. Ayothi Thass gneisses the Buddhist conversions to outcaste the community which excluded Tamil Buddhists in the category of Dalits. Since 1898, Sakya Buddhist Associations have been established throughout Chennai as a result of Thass's commitment to using Buddhism as a means of leading a caste-free existence. South Africa, Burma, and South India all gained additional branches²¹.

The Dalit community experienced a new ideological infiltration and an increase in self-esteem as a result of Thass's narrative on the caste system and non-caste etymological investigation of Tamil terms like Melsaatiyor (people with noble actions) and Tiyasaatiyor (people with destructive actions), Paraiyar (which can refer to people who use percussion instruments)²².

Awarded a literary prize by AGNI (Awakened Group for National Integration, a Tamil organization in Madras with a national network of Congress orientation run by the authors Malan and Sivasankari in 1994 was Pumani, a writer from an untouchable caste who is a Dalit by birth but isn't always eager to be so identified²³. On that occasion, he read a significant satirical allegory called Ellamae peyarccampalattirkuttal, which was eventually published in the now-defunct bi-monthly literary magazine Pudhiya Parvati under the management of M. Natarajan, who was actively engaged in local politics at the time. This created a great impact on Dalit people and through his literary revolution, he broke the stratification lines in Tamil society.

Viramma, weaves her feeling of significant change, a perpetual conversation between the old caste system certainties and institutional and governmental endeavors to better her people's lives, across the personal stories. According to the law, Viramma belongs to the

"scheduled castes" as a Harijan. She is considered to be one of the downtrodden "Dalits" by emancipationists²⁴.

Apart from the political contributions of identity change, reservations, Temple entry bills, welfare schemes, and separate departments to the society by M.C. Raja, Sivasanmugam Pillai, Rettamalai Srinivasan, and Meenambal Sivaraj, they made social movements in direct or direct means to support the abolition of the social stigma that stuck with their community since the Vedic times²⁵. All these intellectuals carried out Temple entry movements in wide parts of Tamil Nadu, especially in the south. The temple entry of Meenakshi temple²⁶ at Madurai which is supported by all Dalit intellectuals become a landmark and after this incident, several temples in Tamil Nadu were conducted with the Dalit temple entry movements.

Public Buildings and social infrastructures like Hotels, Toilets, Hospitals, Schools, and colleges which had separate divisions for the Adi-Dravida community were abolished and integrated into general ones. This created a great impact on the life of the community. The categorization of all the subdivisions of the community into SC & ST and Separate commissions in the constitution gives a unity stand to meet their needs²⁷.

DALIT LITERARY WRITERS AND THEIR IMPACT

Tamil literature has undergone an unprecedented level of improvement as a result of Dalit literature's emergence in the forms of poetry, short stories, plays, novels, and life narratives as well as the subsequent Dalit criticism. This has required a change in the literary canon and redefined the field of aesthetics. The area of Dalit writing in India places a strong emphasis on life stories. Even though Dalit literary experiments in Tamil did not frequently use life narratives, I argue that the sensitivities formed by life narratives, in general, have a substantial impact on what Tamil Dalit literature is. In other words, life narratives are not only a component of Dalit literature; they also define and create it in many ways²⁸.

The dilemma of the alleged universality of the word "writer" has elicited untouchable groups and the majority of whom have already established themselves as authors. They do not wish to identify as Dalit writers; instead, they want their works to be judged on the artistic value of their work rather than the caste to which they belong. This is the solid opinion of Iyayam, Poomani, Cho Dharman, and others. Here, Dharman's declaration, "I am a Dalit by birth; not by writing," is instructive. They have emphasized the importance of writing's aesthetics, emphasizing craft, a deep grasp of social interactions, and command of narrative language. Their writings led to the advantages of modernity, such as education, exposure to urbanization, and new concepts of freedom, equality, and justice informed by Ambedkarite doctrine, as well as social movements that they have inspired²⁹.

Dalit writings encompass a variety of genres, including creative writing, autobiography, history, political critique, economic analysis, and interviews. Despite Dalit intellectuals being affected by the contemporary division of knowledge into many disciplines, Dalit writing resists categorization according to current disciplinary categories in a substantial way. These writings expose the shallowness of the dominant view that views Dalits, almost exclusively, as being in a perpetual state of victimhood, oppression, and subjugation and thus treats them as passive receptors of the dominant culture by highlighting the cultural richness and creative vibrancy in the social life of the Dalit communities. The Dalit claim of active subjectivity as a

group capable of self-expression, self-reflection, and self-representation is brought out. Apart from Buddhism and Ambedkarism, this view draws information and inspiration from Dalit philosophers such as Iyothee Thass, and Foikayil Yohannan, Dharmaraj³⁰.

CONCLUSION:

As a watershed change in the history of Untouchables or Depressed classes in Tamil land, these intellectuals changed the social and political nature of the community. Their social aspirations like Employment, Equal rights, and respect were achieved and Political reservations and infrastructures were developed in the state. The contribution of M.C Rajah and Sivasanmugam Pillai in passing several bills in the assembly were key reasons behind the development of the depressed class. With the aim of opposing the unethical social stigma over them, the Dalit intellectuals started several movements in the form of Dalit literature and Press, Political movements for political rights, and social movements for civil rights. The Dalit Movement is a social revolution that began much earlier, peaked in the 1970s, and has now reached its current stage. Its goal is to replace the traditional hierarchical Indian society with one founded on democratic principles of liberty, equality, and social justice.

The efforts of many leaders, including Pandit Ayodhidasar, Rettamalai Srinivasan, N. Sivaraj, Annai Meenambal, and many SCF leaders, including Pallikonda Krishnasamy, Melakkal Muhammed Bilal, K.P.S. Mani, and others, allowed the Dalit political movements that began with Ambedkar to establish strong roots in the Tamil soil. When the Dravidian movements and Congress groups were loudly promoting their false social improvements at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, the zealous rise of these leaders significantly altered the political history of the state.

All these contributions of the Dalit intellectuals become causes of witnessing the integration of the Adi-Dravida community into society. Today's political and social structures put one group against another, fostering animosity and maintaining a feeling of rejection from the past under the guise of reforms and social uplift. The only way to combat this discrimination is via education. Therefore, the social reform movement won't be successful until all Dalits band together to fight for equality. But they must acknowledge that caste, which is profoundly ingrained in people's minds, cannot be eliminated. Therefore, in this case, social reform would imply ending discriminatory practices and obtaining the rights required for the advancement of the Dalits, a socially and economically disadvantaged group.

In the aspect of Dalit women's empowerment drastic progression is witnessed throughout Tamilnadu since 1970. Both the Central Government of India and the State Government of Tamil Nadu have switched from an individual to a group approach in their welfare initiatives. In this setting, Dalit SHGs led by various women personalities have taken on a very important role in empowering rural women and the weak. However, comprehensive investigations on SHGs are conspicuously lacking. To promote study in this area, scientific instruments must also be developed. It is necessary to study the numerous facets of empowerment in order to create integrated plans for the advancement of rural people.

Currently, Dalit politicians and activists like Dr.K Krishnaswamy and Thol. Thirumavalavan gained the populace and power in the community play a significant role in Tamil politics, and their representation diluted the imposition of Dravidian, Tamil national, and

communist ideologies within their community. aims not just to reconstruct the history of century-old Dalit struggle in Tamil society, but to also point out issues addressed by Dalit intellectuals.

Apart from the contemporary Dalit politicians, several intellectuals in the field of literature emerged as prominent and influential among the community like Meena Kandaswamy and P. Sivakami. P.Sivakami is a former IAS officer, activist, writer, and Dalit feminist from Tamilnadu. *Pazhayana Kazhidalum, Kurruku Vettu, Nalum Thodarum, and Kadaisi Mandhar* are a few of her well-known works which impacted social changes in Tamil society. Meena Kandaswamy began revolutionary writings in view of social transformations and she is known for it. Some of her influential works like *Touch* and *Ms. Militancy* focussed on the progressive aspects of depressed classes and got both national and international attention.

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