



BRITISH MEASURES FOR THE LIBERATION OF THE DEPRESSED CLASS LABOURERS

N. Ambika

Ph.D. Full Time Research Scholar in History ,
Presidency College (Autonomous) ,
Affiliated to the University of Madras , Chennai.



ABSTRACT :

The dawn of political and social consciousness among the western educated Indians in India and England ultimately paved the way for the ameliorative measures for the for the socially and economically depressed classes by the British Government in India. The economic divide between the land-owning higher castes and landless lower castes was justified and accepted by the fatalistic streak in the world view of the Tamil society. In other words, this world view sanctified by the sastric injunctions through caste hierarchy prevented the servile castes from even contemplating or liberating themselves from their landless and status deprived position in Tamil society. Therefore, help had to come from outside the sastric sanctified system and this outside help paved the way for the development of the political and social consciousness among the Depressed Classes Labourers.

KEYWORDS : Depressed Class labourers, British , Paraiyah, Tamil Country, Humanitarian, Collector, Chengleput District, G.O.

INTRODUCTION :

From early medieval times Tamil society became well organised into land-owning higher castes and landless section of the lower castes. Under different systems of land tenure such as *Vellanvagai*, *Brahmadeya*, *Devadana* and *Jivitham* the land-owning sections gradually increased in number till the time when colonial authorities took over the administration of Tamil Country 1801 A.D. In this scheme of economic order all the land-owners were belonged to the higher layers in the caste hierarchy. Lower castes were landless and naturally reduced to the level of slaves.

To the colonial rulers the socio-economic order with which they came into contact looked quit unjust. So they did not come forward to change that because they feared that any change in the existing system might lead to chaos, resulting in heavy revenue loss to them. They could not meet the revenue loss. They were also in a very bad need of finance to meet out the costly wars they fought in India throughout the second half of the Eighteenth Century. In need of revenue the colonial rulers allowed to perpetuate the existing revenue system which seemed advantageous to them.

However the Humanitarians, Utilitarians and Evangelists advocated a liberal philosophy of state intervention to usher in social justice to the masses .They became very active in England ever since the turn of the Nineteenth Century. Liberals in England made abolition of slavery their most important programme. They made use of every forum to achieve their ideals.

In India, the administrators like Bentinck, Baber, Cotton and C.M. Lushington were enthusiastic promoters of the humanitarian philosophies .As administrators working in the Madras Presidency they were aware of all issues relating to agricultural slavery. Revenue constraints however compelled them to allow

the unjust social order to continue.¹

However, a debate on the moral as well legal justification for the continuation of slavery could not be postponed for long. In 1819 a judge on circuit reported to the Madras government that sale slaves by revenue defaulters was vogue in Malabar.² The Board of Revenue immediately sent orders to all district Collectors to send detailed reports on all matters connected with slavery. Without exception all the Collectors confirmed the existence of slavery in areas under their jurisdiction. But no one suggested immediate abolition of the Institution of slavery.³ As per their reports, slaves were better off than the plantation slaves of America. However, impartial observers like Bunchanan and Abbe Dubois had a different story to express. About the general condition of the slaves what Abbe Dubois views can be completely relied upon. According to him, "slaves live in hopeless poverty and the greater number lacks sufficient means to procure even coarsest clothing. They go about almost naked. They live from hand to mouth for the whole year round".⁴

The Board of Revenue suggested certain measures for the gradual abolition of slavery. The Court of Directors also advised the Madras government that, "you will be extremely cautious in making any regulation for defining the relation of master and slave".⁵ In the meantime, the District Collectors in the meantime were taking all steps in restoring run away slaves to their respective masters enabling them to carry on agricultural operations without any difficulty.⁶

In n England Humanitarians viewed the extinction of slavery in the British Empire as a matter top concern. They mounted pressure on the British government to abolish slavery throughout the Empire at the earliest. Due to their tireless efforts slavery was abolished every where except in India in 1833. The Charter Act of 1833 however had a provision requiring the Governors General in Council to take into consideration the means of extinguishing slavery.⁷ Colonial interests demanded that slavery should continue in India. But the British government in India had to bow before the relentless efforts of the humanitarians. At last , the Governor -General of India reluctantly gave his assent to the Slavery Abolition Act of 1843. It was followed by the Indian Penal Code in 1861.⁸

This Act had little to offer the slave population.⁹ Utilising the loopholes in the Act the slave-owners brought back majority of the emancipated men under the fold of bonded slavery. Accordingly the erstwhile slaves worked under their masters either as *padiyals* or as *pannaiyals*. This new arrangement did not alter their servile status even a bit. Government reports speak about the condition of the freed men in glorious terms. But in reality majority of them "for a considerable part of the year could not take a full meal at all with the meager income they received" as attested to by Brandt, the Sub Collector of Tirunelveli District.¹⁰ Rev. William Goudie a missionary who worked among the Paraiyahs of Chengalput District in an article entitled, 'The Pariaha and the Land' published in the *Harvest Field* in 1894 stated that "Depressed Class labourer is so miserably underpaid that the first law of life in *paracherry* is that for every mouth that eats there must be two hands earning. From the child of four upwards they must all be bread-winners or they cannot be bread eaters."¹¹

The condition of emigrant depressed class labourers who went to overseas colonies as indentured labourers due to the interaction of 'push' and 'pull' factors was also the same. This indentured labour system is described by no less a person than Hugh Tinker as a new system of slavery. The Plantation depressed class workers had to work in inhospitable regions where plantations were located. They were recklessly exploited by planters as well as the *kanganies*. However, plantation workers could earn more money than the bonded men in India.¹² With the money at their disposal a few could become petty land owners. Becoming owners of land was not easy for them because all sorts of obstacles were placed before them by caste Hindu land owner whenever they wanted to buy waste lands. Government's policy on allotment of waste lands was also land- lord biased. The *mirasidars* made all attempts to prevent the depressed class people to acquire and cultivate land in their own name. Further, every effort was taken to keep the them landless.¹³

There was a sea change in the attitude of missionaries and government towards the landless depressed class labourers . For a long time since Robert De Nobili established his Mission at Madurai, the Catholic Church in India was following a policy of accommodating depressed class people in the church.

Missionaries were according to Goudi "seem to have argued that if only the Brahmin citadel could be captured all the rest would fall to them by natural process. Let us win the intellectual and spiritual hierarchy and with the rest our task will be easy".¹⁴ In their attempt to convert the caste Hindus of society to Christianity they neglected the plight of the downtrodden who for reasons of social oppression had been joining the Christian fold in huge numbers unsolicited. When missionaries found it impossible to attract the spiritual hierarchy they were compelled by force of circumstance rather than led by any deliberate design to turn to the Pariah labourers.¹⁵ Once they were determined to pull out the untouchables from the gutter, they were earnest in their activities.

The Protestant Missionaries in Chengleput District came forward to find out ways and means to improve the living conditions of the oppressed class labourers. Rev. Andrew for made a complete enquiry about the condition of the depressed class labourers in Chengleput district. He even submitted a memorandum to the government in 1889, insisting it to introduce ameliorative measures. When the government was not responded to his appeals, he went to England and highlighted the pathetic conditions of the depressed class labourers with the patronage of some powerful members of the British Parliament like Samuel Smith, the liberal member from Flintshire.¹⁶

For a while, a liberal minded official by name Tremenheere, the then Collector of Chengleput District prepared 'Notes on the Pariahs of Chengleput' in October 1981.¹⁷ It was presented to the government for immediate attention. He lamented that depressed class labourers remained horribly poor and their conditions were utterly deplorable in rural areas and they were practically "untaught, uncared for and unpitied".¹⁸ He appealed the government to give top priority to the depressed class labourers in the purchase of waste lands. He further recommended that the government should come forward to enact proper and timely laws for the protection of depressed class labourers from the inhuman activities of the *pattadars* and also urged the government to give unquestionable ownership rights to possess homes for the depressed class labourers.¹⁹

In this changed situation, the disabilities of the depressed class labourers received more public coverage. *The Hindu* stated that "the condition of the depressed class labourers is truly miserable ...the Hindu religion has done nothing for them except to prescribe the most abject slavery as the lot for which alone they are fit".²⁰ Native newspapers were enthusiastically supported the cause of the down trodden class labourers.. *Arya Jana Paripalani* supported Chengleput District Board's decision to open three local fund schools for the benefit of the downtrodden class children.²¹ *Vikata Thoothan* after praising much Tremenheere for convincing the government that "Mirasidars look upon the pariah as an animal fit only for menial work and take care that he does not own land", suggested "that the government should spare no pains to reform the Acts relating to the acquisition of land, allow the paiahs to acquire waste lands and make special arrangements to educate the pariahs".²² *Shams-ul- Akhbar* condemned the Brahmins and caste Hindus for oppressing the depressed class labourers and found fault with the government which did not adopt any effectual measures to remove the ills connected the caste ridden society.²³

The humanitarian movement in England provided the intellectual base for the liberation of the servile class labourers in Tamil Country . Inspired by the humanitarian movement, the British bureaucracy in India initiated legislative measures for the cause of the depressed class labourers. The concerted efforts of the elites in England and the elites in India found echoes in the Indian press also. This was largely responsible for the creation of public opinion against the age old suppression of the servile class labourers in India. Soon this increasing public consciousness encourage the servile class labourers themselves to protest against the repression by the caste Hindus.²⁴

In 1891 the depressed class leader, Iyothee Thass founded the Dravida Mahajana Sabha. With an organization to back them the leaders like Iyothee Thass and Rettamalai Srinivasan accelerated their campaign for social legislations aiming at the protection of the depressed class labourers . In its first conference held at Ooty on 1st December 1891, the Dravida Mahajana Sabha passed several resolutions urging the Government to ensure civil rights and educational concessions.²⁵ It was further requested that government should establish schools for the depressed classes in every village and assign waste lands to the

depressed classes labourers wherever such land was available.²⁶ Rettaimali Srinivasan started a weekly magazine called 'Parayan' in highlighted the pitiable condition of the depressed class labourers. His magazine devoted completely for the problems and insurmountable obstacles of the Depressed Class labourers.²⁷

Eventhough there was mounting pressures, the Government did not bring any legislation to improve the condition of the downtrodden labourers. However, G.O.No.1010 & 1010A issued by the Department of Revenue made provision for allotment of lands available in government hands out of areas which had been freed from preferential rights by purchase at sales for arrears of revenue. The G.O. further stated that house sites would be made available to the depressed class labourers.²⁸ Though the G.O. provided for allotment of waste lands to the depressed class labourers in 1892 itself no follow up action was taken. Only in 1902 waste lands were assigned to them through out the Madras Presidency. The G.O. empowered the Collectors to allot waste lands to the depressed class labourers.

Due to the increasing pressure from the elite class in England and India and from side of the missionaries, at last the British Government initiated humanitarian measures towards the depressed class labourers. The Madras Government, in the beginning, feared to interfere in the social system of the Indians. When it found the social order was unjust, it determined and came forward to protect and promote the interest of the depressed class labourers. It enacted a series of laws to liberate the depressed class labourers from the serfdom of the caste Hindus. This changed situation was well utilized by the depressed class elites who started many newspapers and through which ventilated their grievances and attracted the attention of the British bureaucracy. As a consequence, improvement in the conditions of the depressed classes started to begin.

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