



UPWARD MOBILITY OF THE BACKWARD CLASSES IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT :

The aim of this study is to highlight the various measures implemented to foster the advancement of these classes in the region. To stem the nationalist movement in Madras Presidency, the colonial administrators welcomed the non-Brahmin or the Dravidian Movement in the early part of the Twentieth century. When the Justice Party came to power, the upper non-Brahmins were able to enter the public services whereas the backward non-Brahmins were unable to enter such positions. Hence a number of the backward caste associations were started by the caste leaders. These Associations brought awakening among their caste members and struggle to bring changes in their social pattern. These Associations were started in the beginning of the Twentieth Century and they were grouped under the broad category of the 'Backward Classes' after the Justice party assumed power. The Government Communal Orders and the genuine socio-economic measures of the British Government and the Justice Ministries paved the way for the successful working of the Backward Class Movement which struggled relentlessly for attaining the job opportunities and educational and property rights for their members, and fought against the social ills affecting the women in general and backward class women in particular.



KEYWORDS: Backward Classes, Tamil Nadu, Caste Associations, Madras Presidency, Devadasis, Kallars Non-Brahmins, Justice party, Widow remarriage, Dowry, Thiru.Vi.ka., Voting and Property Rights.

INTRODUCTION :

In Tamil Nadu, numerous social groups are classified as 'Backward Classes'. The origin of the term. Backward Classes' may be traced to the later part of the Nineteenth Century. Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century the concepts of backwardness was adopted in the Madras Presidency while offering employment opportunities.¹ In the early Twentieth Century, the condition of the Backward Classes was dire, distressing, and deplorable. In an public address, Justice Ranade outlined the social issues that required elimination: the subordinate status of women, the prevalence of child marriages within limited circles or sub-castes, the lack of education among women and their social seclusion (*purdah*); restrictions on inter-caste interaction; and the practice of untouchability.² Naturally, these issues also affected the Backward Classes. Practices such as *sati* and child marriage were widespread; furthermore, polyandry was observed among certain hill tribes like the Todas, Kurumbas, and Kallars.³

Widow remarriage was strictly prohibited. Indeed, the plight of these women was worse than that of slaves, and they were denied access to education. The existence of the *devadasi* system among the Backward Classes posed yet another obstacle to their progress. Certain groups, including the Kallars and Maravars, involved in cattle theft and acts of banditry.⁴ Like other segments of society, the Backward Classes were deeply attached to superstitions and omens. Despite their poverty, they often celebrated weddings with great pomp and ostentation, featuring festivities that lasted five or six days.

The dominance of Brahmins across all spheres of life in Tamil Nadu sparked jealousy among other social groups and led to demands for educational privileges for non-Brahmin backward sections within the framework of state grant regulations.⁵ This situation encouraged these groups to emphasize their status as backward communities and to organize effectively to access state-provided opportunities. For instance, associations and community organizations emerged to discuss-in regular meetings-ways and means of improving the welfare of their respective castes. The non-Brahmin leaders who suffered under the Brahmin controlled then Congress Party, such as Theagaraya Chetty and T.M. Nair, founded the South Indian People's Association on 20th November 1916, to safeguard non-Brahmin interests.⁶ This Association, renamed as 'South Indian Liberal Federation' of the non-Brahmins waged a relentless struggle against political and social injustice.⁷ A lack of leadership and the pervasiveness of Brahmin dominance led these groups to strongly support the Non-Brahmin Movement launched in 1916. However, this movement failed to protect the interests of the backwards classes; instead, it primarily benefited upper-caste non-Brahmin Hindus.⁸ This situation created the need for the establishment of the Madras Provincial Backward Classes League in 1935.⁹ A committee was appointed to disseminate the League's ideals and objectives.¹⁰ The inaugural conference was held in Madras on 6th August 1939. Thereafter, annual conferences were organized to discuss necessary measures for their welfare and to reach a consensus on these issues.

Various factors accelerated the advancement of the Backward Classes. During the early Twentieth Century, several social reformers came to the forefront, including E.V. Ramasami, Thiru. Vi. Ka., Maraimalai Adigal, C. Subramania Bharathi, Bharathidasan and Muthulakshmi Reddy.¹¹ The zeal and dedication of these prominent leaders created a favourable environment in Tamil Nadu and gave significant momentum to the development of the classes in question.

During the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, various backward class caste associations such as the Tondaimandala Tuluva Vellalar Association (1880), the Vanniya Kula Kshatriya Maha Sangham (1888), the Madras Presidency Muslim Association (1908), the Nadar Mahajana Sangham (1910), the Kamma Mahajana Sangham (1910), the Sourashtra Mahajana Sangham, All-India Yadav Mahasabha (1933), All -India Mukkulathor Sangham (1934), and South Indian Sengunthar Mahajana Sangham (1927), Vaniga Vysia Sangham, the Kulalar Sangham, Nagarathar Association, Telugu Chettiar Association, Mutariyar Sangham -were established.¹² In their regular meetings, these associations discussed ways and means to improve the welfare of their respective castes.¹³ Both the government and caste organizations implemented measures such as fee concessions, scholarships, and the provision of free food and clothing.¹⁴ Consequently, they secured various benefits, including reserved quotas in public employment and educational institutions (schools and colleges)¹⁵, the relaxation of age limits for entry into the public service¹⁶, the lowering of minimum educational requirements¹⁷, and exemptions from application fees.¹⁸

These measures brought about a steady and positive transformation in the traditions and habits of the Backward Classes. These changes contributed to their progress in various ways. While social reform measures in the Western Countries were implemented uniformly and equally across society, in India, such measures were applied separately to each community group. This situation led to inequalities in terms of both implementation and outcomes.

Prevention of Early Marriages among the Backward Classes

Among the strata referred to as 'backward classes', betrothal arrangements took place before the young woman had reached the age of maturity. Worse still, the marriage was sometimes consummated-meaning sexual intercourse took place-while the bride was still a child. In many castes, a father who failed to marry off his daughter before or immediately after the onset of puberty was

considered to have neglected his religious duty to arrange her marriage at an early age. For families in these strata, a daughter represented both a burden to her own parents and an asset to her husband's family, where she was expected to take charge of meal preparation. In the Toda community, however, girls were often married off when they were merely two or three years old.¹⁹ The Child Marriage Reform League and the Madras Provincial Social Conference adopted resolutions in 1911²⁰ and 1915²¹, respectively, calling for the age of marriage and the age of consent for sexual intercourse to be raised to 14. The steady spread of women's education inevitably led to a delay in the age of marriage; a tendency to avoid early marriages gained momentum, driven by the desire to allow young women to complete their education.²²

Widow Remarriage among the Backward Classes

The initial campaign launched by Iswarachandra Vidyasagar in India led to the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalized the remarriage of widows.²³ Reformers such as Bharathidasan²⁴ and Thiru.Vi. Ka²⁵ argued for no objection to the remarriage of widows at a young age.²⁶ These efforts were initially spearheaded by various caste organizations, such as the All-India Devanga Association, the South Indian Sengunthar Mahajana Sangam, and the South Indian Muslim Association. Periodicals such as *Sengunthar* began publication in the Ramnad region. Significantly, by the end of 1947, the practice of widow remarriage had gained widespread acceptance among the vast majority of the Backward Classes.²⁷

During the same period, the government and caste organizations implemented measures to improve the welfare of widows who chose not to remarry. Khan Bahadur Ali Dost Khan established a relief fund to provide assistance to the poor and to widows. In 1903, scholarships-covering both boarding and day-student status-were awarded to enable widows from the Backward Classes to continue their education.²⁸

Marriage Among the Sub-Castes

Higher education, public sector employment, and urbanization paved the way for the removal of barriers between sub-castes. Through marital ties and frequent interaction, the distinctions between the Koravars of the Karur and Namakkal regions virtually disappeared, and both groups came to be known by a common name of 'Salem Melurnad Koravars'.²⁹

Voting and Property Rights

As a result of expanded educational opportunities and Western influence, women from backward classes developed an awareness of their rights. These women began to assert their rights, particularly regarding property ownership and voting. A movement aiming to secure equal rights with men had already begun as early as 1917.³⁰ In the late 1920s, S. Muthulakshmi Reddy achieved a significant distinction by being nominated to the Madras Legislative Council.³¹ Demands for voting and property rights gained momentum among women from the backward classes; consequently, numerous laws were enacted in 1956 to address gender inequality.

Dowry and Purdah System

The dowry system and the practice of *purdah* (the seclusion of women from society and men) also drew significant attention from women in the segments of society referred to as 'backward classes'. Muslim women in Tamil Nadu gradually realized that the deprivation of fresh air and sunlight-an inevitable consequence of the secluded lives they led-was a direct cause of tuberculosis, osteomalacia, and severe pelvic deformities.³² Caste-based organizations adopted resolutions aimed at combating the dowry system.³³ In 1938, Bharathidasan emphasized the importance of family planning.³⁴

Devadasi System

Theoretically, *devadasis* were professional women dedicated to the service of a deity; they entered into a symbolic marriage with the god and were required to sing and dance in his presence.³⁵ Members of the Melakkarar communities in the Tamil regions undertook roles as temple musicians and

performed various auxiliary duties.³⁶ The birth of the Isai Vellalar caste in the 1920s signaled a fixed and uniform identity to an otherwise heterogeneous social group of Melakkarars.³⁷ Meanwhile, in Madurai and Coimbatore, the Sedana (Devanga) community had its own dancers, known as 'Devanga' or 'Seda girls'. At one time, there were more than two hundred thousand *devadasis* in Madras.³⁸ In 1924, an Act was passed criminalizing the trafficking of minors.³⁹ In 1947, another Act was passed prohibiting the dedication of women to temples.⁴⁰

Groups classified as 'backward classes'-such as the Koravar, Toda, and Kurumba-maintained certain unique pre-marital customs. When a young Toda woman married a man, she was also considered the wife of that man's brothers. A Kalla woman could have up to ten husbands, all of whom were recognized as the fathers of her children.⁴¹ Polygamy was a common practice within the Koravar community.⁴² Thanks to the efforts of caste-based organizations, the practice of polygamy disappeared among the Toda and Koravar communities.

The spread of education influenced the customs and habits of the backward classes in Tamil Nadu. The use of shirts and turbans began to appear in the Toda community; even Toda women started preferring to wear saris instead of their traditional attire.⁴³ The tradition of tattooing among hill tribes gradually declined, though it is difficult to determine whether this was due to economic factors or changing fashions.⁴⁴ Education led the backward classes to adopt a simpler approach to wedding ceremonies; a notable trend was the reduction of the traditionally five- or six-day wedding duration to a single day.⁴⁵

Hill tribes, weaver groups, and laborers belonging to the backward classes-who constituted the majority of the population-suffered greatly from the problem of alcoholism, which disrupted the peaceful lives of these communities. Following the introduction of alcohol prohibition, many weavers who had previously worked for others set up their own looms at home.⁴⁶ In order to support the development of members of the backward classes who had previously earned a living by collecting palm sap (toddy) and selling alcohol, Cooperative societies and associations were established for activities such as basket weaving, fruit growing, beekeeping, hand-spinning, toy making, poultry farming, and hand-loom weaving.

Measures to suppress Criminal Activities of the Kallars

Until the late Nineteenth Century, activities such as extortion, cattle theft, and banditry were associated with the Kallar community. The enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1911⁴⁷ and the establishment of rural panchayats (local councils) in the 1920s brought the Kallars together under a unified leadership to discuss and plan ways to encourage peaceful activities.⁴⁸ Consequently, crime rates declined, and small-scale, home-based production activities (cottage industries) were initiated in six villages in Tirumangalam, as well as in one settlement each in Palani and Dindigul.⁴⁹

Thanks to social welfare measures implemented by the government and relevant caste organizations, significant and positive changes occurred among the groups designated as 'Backward Classes'. This led to various gains, including access to employment and food, educational opportunities, adequate health and hygiene conditions, housing improvements, and a minimum income level.

Furthermore, these initiatives aimed to allocate land to landless individuals belonging to these classes, expand irrigation infrastructure, and provide credit for the acquisition of modern agricultural machinery. However, certain communities engaged in traditional occupations-such as barbering and fishing-bravely faced major challenges. Allocating land for housing or commercial premises (such as hair salons) and providing public laundry facilities (*dhobikhana*) contributed significantly to improving the economic conditions of these groups.

For the vast majority of people belonging to the Sengunthar, Devanga, Saliyan, and Sourashtra castes, weaving remains the primary source of income. Cooperative Societies have been established in major production centers to manage the supply of yarn and the marketing of the finished products.

The government opened handicrafts centers in all district capitals to market products made by artisans such as jewelers, carpenters, shoemakers, and basket weavers. This initiative enabled these artisans to secure fair prices for their products and continue their trades without interruption. Additionally, the government established training centers where these artisans could learn modern

designs and patterns. Communication infrastructure was expanded, and primary healthcare centers were set up in rural areas heavily populated by Backward Class communities.

To conclude, from 1870 onwards, the description of 'Backward Classes' commonly applied to various sections of the population which included depressed classes, exterior classes, excluded castes, untouchables, outcastes because the identification of the term 'backward classes' vary from time to time, period to period, state to state, region to region and rural to urban areas in the colonial era. Due to the administrative measures, growth of the non-Brahmin awareness emergence of the caste association and the introduction of Government Communal orders of the Justice Ministries, there was tremendous change in the conditions of the backward classes in colonial Tamil Nadu. The members of the backward classes entered not only in public services and political activities of the colonial era, aiming at the progress of the backward classes in all spheres of public activities.

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