



The Depressed Classes Elevation Society of South India in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The early decades of the twentieth century marked a transformative phase in the history of the Depressed Classes in South India. The establishment of the Depressed Classes Mission Society in 1908 under the leadership of Sir Israel Nallappah symbolized a decisive step towards organized social reform, aimed at eradicating deep-rooted caste discrimination and uplifting marginalized communities. This study explores the emergence of reformist movements, governmental interventions, and cooperative initiatives that collectively contributed to improving the educational and socio-economic conditions of the Depressed Classes in the Madras Presidency. Drawing upon legislative actions, missionary efforts, and local reform movements, the paper highlights how these developments paved the way for the institutionalization of social welfare policies and later constitutional safeguards in independent India. The analysis situates these reforms within the broader discourse of social justice, emphasizing their historical significance as precursors to modern affirmative action and caste equity measures.

Imperial Council, the establishment of cooperative societies, and educational concessions for the Depressed Classes reflected a gradual institutional response to the demands for equality. However, entrenched caste hierarchies and administrative inertia often impeded the effective realization of these goals. Despite these challenges, the reformist momentum during this period laid the foundation for the subsequent emergence of organized Dalit movements, leading to constitutional recognition and the formation of dedicated departments for the welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This study seeks to analyze these early developments as a crucial phase in India's historical trajectory toward social emancipation and equity.

Keywords: Depressed Classes; Social Reform; Caste Discrimination; Madras Presidency; Educational Empowerment; Cooperative Societies; British Administration; Dalit Movement; Untouchability; Social Justice; Colonial Policy; Welfare Measures; Early Twentieth Century India.

Elevation and Welfare Measure

The first decade of the 20th Century was considered as a mile-stone in the History of the Depressed Classes. A new society was formed to serve for the development of the Depressed Classes having its aim the elevation and welfare of the Depressed Classes. The society was inaugurated on 29th June 1908 and Sir Israel Nallappah, the head master, Agriculture and Industrial School at Pandur in Thiruvallur taluk in Chingleput District was the founder President of the society¹. The first conference was presided over by Sir Abhraham Bhagianathan's². Many leaders enthusiastically attended the conference and among them the dignitaries were V.S.Srinivasa Sastri of Servants of India Society, O.Kandaswami Chettiar, Lecturer in Christian College, Madras, K.Sesha Iyer, Yakub Hussain, E.Brutzer, Muthu Veerain Pandithar, editor of the Boologavachan and GA. Natesan³. In 1909, Shindey, the labourer from Bombay started the Madras Branch of Depressed Classes Mission

I. Introduction

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a critical turning point in the socio-political evolution of South India, particularly with respect to the condition of the Depressed Classes communities historically subjected to systemic exclusion, untouchability, and economic deprivation. The formation of the *Depressed Classes Mission Society* in 1908 signaled a conscious awakening among reformers, educators, and administrators towards addressing long-standing inequalities within the Hindu social order. Leaders such as Sir Israel Nallappah, M.B. Dadabhoy, M.C. Raja, and G. Natesan, supported by organizations like the Servants of India Society and Christian missions, played a pioneering role in mobilizing public opinion and advocating for state-led welfare initiatives.

The early twentieth century also saw the intersection of social reform with colonial administrative policy. Legislative resolutions in the



Society of India. This society called for conferences at various towns like Chidambaram, Tindivanam, Kanchipuram, Tanjore, Nagapattinam, Nannilam, Tirukkadaiyur and Mayavaram. The main motto of these conferences was to improve the socio-economic condition of the Depressed Classes.

After 1910, it is pointed out here that anti-Brahmin attitude had increased in Madras and the Brahmins were blamed for their overbearing attitude. Consequently, many sagacious leaders tried for the eradication of the social evils prevailed in the society and the British Government adopted a strict neutral attitude⁴.

In 1916, a Depressed Classes conference was held in Madras. In this conference they pleaded with the Government for the remedy to the long struggle of the Depressed Classes for having equal footing with other caste Hindus. They also requested the Government to make recommendations for measures which will secure freedom and justice for the Depressed Classes⁵. Consequently, the State Government enquired about their condition and studied the problems of the Depressed Classes and decided to provide possible welfare measures. It further passed resolutions which came in the form of the Government Order. This Government Order was issued to each department and it asked the authorities concerned to report the actual condition of the Depressed Classes every now and then. The officials after a week's observation reported that only through education, they may have the awareness of freedom of speech and expression and they stressed the importance of education in uplifting the Depressed Classes.

In the Imperial Legislative Council, on 16th March, 1916, Hon'ble M.B. Dadabhoy passed a resolution for the improvement of the Depressed Classes. It was because of such efforts due representation was given in course of time to all backward communities in education and appointment in Government organisations. Yet, the struggle between the upper caste Hindus and Depressed Classes continued. The orthodox Hindus were not allowing the children of the Depressed Classes to get education in Gurukulas or Ghadikas. If there was a transgression, the members of the Depressed Classes were punished or assaulted. In Madurai, there were more than 10,000 students distributed in different institutions of which two to three hundred were Brahmins. The Brahmins had the right to apply for higher education while the other lower caste pupils especially the Vaishyas and Sudras were excluded from that privilege⁶. By such measures the education was denied to the socially and economically weaker

sections of the society. Many social reformers were quite against these discriminatory activities.

According to A.S. Altekar, the State was not interested in enforcing impartibility among the castes. However, it extended equal patronage to all sects and religions and also to their establishments by financing works of public utility like tanks, canals, wells, houses and hospitals⁷. Fortunately, the British rule did the best in the Madras Presidency because the appeals and requests of the Depressed Classes were taken into consideration by the Government. The Central Government also equally showed interest and issued orders and implemented socio-economic welfare measures along with educational concessions to the Depressed Classes in the Madras Presidency. After giving necessary support to the amelioration works, the Central Government frequently asked the Presidency to send a report on the condition of the Depressed Classes in the provinces explaining as to what had been done and what further could be done for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes⁸.

The Provincial Government of Madras examined the socio-economic condition of the Depressed Classes of all the districts. Further, district level and village level study of the Depressed Classes was made and proposals were passed for their improvement. But these attempts failed to bear fruits because of absence of special organisation or department to take steps periodically to improve their condition. Further, there was generally an indifference and hostility among the upper classes to the measures of upliftment of the Depressed Classes⁹. Up to 1920, there was no separate department or organisations in the Madras Government for the welfare of the Depressed Classes. The Depressed Classes were the downtrodden castes and they were considered as Aboriginal groups and Hill tribes and a few were Criminal tribes. They also had their own life styles and practices. They relied more upon the cattle breeding and agriculture. These castes were always below the poverty line. It was in such a situation that the Government had taken due care for them in the early years of the twentieth century in providing basic amenities such as food, cloth and shelter to them. The Government had taken a survey upon them but an actual strength of each caste in the district was not properly ascertained due to the lack of co-operation of these classes.

Also, sometimes the census reports gave defective information. For example, the Doms are the distinct criminal tribes and outcastes. These tribes were not enlisted in the tribal list of 1911 census. Besides, it was compiled in the list by the Government Order in 1919 that certain tribes were



not at all registered¹⁰. There is another problem that arises in the list of aboriginals. The Yerukukas and Yenadis whose claims to be considered as aboriginals were very much doubtful and it was the demand of the Malayalis who emigrated from the plains were to be included as hill tribes. But, the well-known castes namely Gondas and Gadabes were not included in the tribal list. The total population of the Irulas of the Madras Presidency was 1,00,000; but in the Census Report only 2300 were registered as Irulas and 5400 were entered as animists¹¹. But Edgar Thurston, the author of Castes and Tribes of Southern India gives the list of the castes and tribes in the Madras Presidency in the right perspective. Reports of the survey and investigation during the period 1900-20, about the Depressed Classes reveal their social position in the Hindu society in the following manner. The Depressed Classes in Tamil Nadu had the following disabilities.

- They had to face social humiliation and were prohibited in the social gatherings,
- Basic amenities were denied to them,
- There were isolated colonies for the untouchables,
- Educational institutions, Gurukulas and the hereditary Brahmin schools imposed hard and fast rules upon the Depressed Castes so that they could not get admission in these institutions.
- The boys and girls of the lower castes and tribes were not given entry even into the campus of these institutions¹².

If that was the case of the Depressed Classes and untouchables in the Madras Presidency the hill tribes and aboriginals in the Presidency had different life styles and restraints which were stated in the records as follows:

- The Tribal had a secluded life in the society.
- They were traditionally bound in their marriage, child birth and other functions and did not allow their children to get education.
- They depended upon the resources of the forests.
- They had culture of the "hard ground" and did not have refined practices.
- Their food, dress and habitual resident places varied from the settled people of the society¹³.

The provincial government very carefully examined the conditions prevailed in the Hindu society and took a remedial step for the development of the Depressed Classes and Tribes through the Board of Revenue. The Board of Revenue scheduled the list of socially and economically weaker sections

and came to know that these people worked as slaves and were not treated well. Also, the social reformers highlighted the sufferings of these people and worked actively for the improvement of the downtrodden people in the Madras Province. The important leaders in such a task were G Natesan, T.M.Nair, Sir P. Theagarayar, Panagal Raja, Subbarayalu Reddiyar, K.V.Reddy Naidu, P.T.Rajan, A.R.Mudaliyar and R.K.Shanmugam Chettiar. Since 1900, newspapers and magazines were used as weapons to propagate the social awareness. The prominent among them were Boologavachan (1900), Tamilan (1907), Anoor Mitran (1910) and Adi Dravidan (1919)¹⁴. Through this media many recommendations and proposals for the welfare of the Depressed Classes were highlighted.

Besides social reformers, and media, the Government was also trying to condemn the evil practices like untouchability and remove such conceptions from the minds of the caste Hindus. As a result, the Government decided to form a separate department for these suffering lot through which all welfare measures can be implemented for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes. Further, the Government wanted a district level genuine study of the socio-economic condition of the Depressed Classes. So, it appointed K.S.Srinivasachariar, Deputy Collector to go on special duty to Tanjore to enquire into the economic condition of these classes¹⁵. The enquiries made and information collected proved that the Depressed Classes were mostly depending upon agriculture for their livelihood. Hence, the provincial government by passage of time started Agricultural Co-operative Societies for improving their condition by providing loans, seeds, oxen and ploughshare¹⁶. This survey was conducted only in Tanjore district as a preliminary step.

In the subsequent years many socially interested persons and reformers such as Dadabhai Naoroji and M.C.Raja were demanding rights and concessions and privileges for the Depressed Classes. The demands and rights were recommended in the Imperial Legislative Council which was for the creation of a separate department for the development of these classes. M.B. Dadabhoy, the Congress leader was the sole advocate for the formation of a separate department called Labour Department for the Depressed Classes¹⁷. He strongly recommended to the Government in favour of Depressed Classes. The Depressed Classes comprised of untouchable castes, aboriginal tribes, criminal tribes and wandering tribes and the total strength was roughly estimated as 1/4th of the total population of India. His resolution was



moved in the Imperial Legislative Council with the following viewpoints.

- ❖ Need for an administrative body, to formulate policies and measures to improve the Depressed Classes,
- ❖ Each provincial body should work for the welfare schemes,
- ❖ For the co-ordination of any scheme or work, special officers are acutely needed,
- ❖ To improve the condition of the Depressed Classes in a phased manner and
- ❖ To work for the development of their moral, material and educational condition.

It was also decided that in order to implement these resolutions, the local government and administrative bodies should be invited to formulate the welfare schemes with due regard to their traditional customs and practices. The Provincial Government was thus entrusted with full responsibility on the deputed work of the Imperial Government. According to the dictums of the Imperial Government the district collectors in the Madras province thoroughly investigated and surveyed the condition of the Depressed Classes and reported to the provincial government. The collective information revealed the actual condition of the Depressed Classes which are as follows:

- ❖ The untouchables were not treated well in the society by the upper caste Hindus.
- ❖ Diversities in Caste prejudice existed.
- ❖ The untouchables were not given equal status in the society.
- ❖ Educational facilities were not provided to the Depressed Classes. The schools for the upper caste Hindus only were started.
- ❖ The Depressed Classes were degraded and were thrown below the poverty line. These classes were much affected and they stuck to their own traditional customs and menial occupations for their livelihood.
- ❖ Unemployment prevails in the tribal areas and education was a riddle to the tribes and it was hardly possible to improve them without education.
- ❖ Their life closely was attached to the dark forests especially to nomadic life and educating their children was detested by them.

As pith and marrow, in the enquiry on them revealed their ignorance and poverty and the oppression and exploitation of these classes by the upper classes were the main causes for their miserable condition¹⁸.

The Board of Revenue also investigated their condition and recommended to the Government for their wellbeing as indicated below: -

- ❖ Provincial Government should enumerate all the welfare works of the state.
- ❖ To provide the amenities, the state did not fully concentrate on each sub-division of the society; hence this should be taken into account.
- ❖ The deputed officer of the Government should work for the development of the Depressed Classes.

In the Madras Legislative Council, leaders like, M.C. Raja greatly urged for the creation of a separate department for their development. During the same time the Revenue Board had come to the conclusion that, in spite of government's efforts to uplift the Depressed Classes, they were still in deplorable condition as there was no co-operation from other members of the society¹⁹.

With all these developments, the department for the welfare of the Depressed Classes was created with the concurrence of the Revenue Department of the Government of Madras. A crystal-clear condition was laid down by the government, which led to the creation of an office for better administration of the welfare department. In order to make it convenient, a special officer was deputed for the amelioration of the condition of the Depressed Classes. The crucial need of the department was very much felt by people, private bodies and governmental and non-governmental associations. Wrong views of the prejudiced English Collectors about the social condition of the Depressed Classes were against the implementation of welfare measures for the Depressed Classes. This problem continued for some time and in fact, it should be understood that the district Collectors were entirely in collusion with the upper-class Hindus who were employed as the subordinates in the British administration²⁰.

From very ancient times the life of the Panchamas or allied group of the Depressed Classes was mostly below the poverty line. They were always suffering under the pressure of starvation. These people mostly worked as coolies and daily wage earners and were landless labourers. Only after a thorough study of the economic condition of these people it was felt that a separate department was needed as indicated earlier for the amelioration work. The Government too was interested to some extent to eliminate inequality in all spheres of the society. So, it felt to elevate them in the society stable economy was essential. Providing financial assistance, developing awareness among them, accommodating



them in the newly built houses to check seclusion and imparting education were of crucial importance in the 19th and 20th Centuries and the government decided to go ahead with the programmes for the betterment of these classes.

The Government soon tried to elevate their economic status with the ameliorative works. For their upliftment private organisations like Christian Missions, Special Services League, Depressed Classes Mission and Young Men's Christian Association tried to help the Depressed Classes in all possible ways²¹. But their services were aimed at improving their own groups in the Depressed Classes and they rendered services not for all communities of the Depressed Classes.

The Government also tried in many ways to strengthen their economic standard and for that purpose the Government started many Co-operative Societies for the Depressed Communities. In 1904, a Co-operative Law was passed and a Co-operative society was started for the elevation of the Depressed Classes²². Before the creation of the Labour Department the first Co-operative society was formed in Tanjore in 1916²³. In 1918, there were 53 Co-operative Societies functioning in the province out of which 42 were for agricultural purpose²⁴.

The main objectives of the Co-operative societies were to offer them employment and engage them in fruitful activities for their livelihood and for the upliftment of all the Depressed Classes. In 1919, 14,000 persons were members in 233 Co-operative societies. For the welfare of the Depressed Classes 118 Co-operative societies out of 233 were functioning in the province with the support of the government²⁵. The Co-operative societies functioned efficiently in all the places in the province. Through the Co-operative societies, house sites were distributed to these people in Tanjore district. It was decided after sometime to extend this scheme to all districts for all the Depressed Classes. The repayment of loan was in instalment basis for 19 years instead of 10 years so as to make repayment easy for them²⁶. The Co-operative societies were formed not only for the welfare of the untouchables or Panchamas but also for the Aborigines and Criminal Tribes. The expected development took place only after three decades. In the independent India, according to the Constitution of India under Article 46, it has been specifically laid down that the provinces should promote with special care the educational and economic interest 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 exploitation²⁷.

II. Conclusion

The movement for the upliftment of the Depressed Classes in South India during the early twentieth century represented a watershed in the broader history of India's struggle for social equality. The *Depressed Classes Mission Society* and related reform initiatives not only challenged the oppressive structures of caste but also brought the issues of social justice and inclusion to the forefront of both public discourse and governmental policy. Through educational reforms, cooperative movements, and legislative advocacy, the condition of marginalized communities began to witness gradual improvement despite the persistent resistance from orthodox social groups and administrative limitations.

The establishment of specialized departments for the welfare of the Depressed Classes in the Madras Presidency marked the institutionalization of social reform within the colonial framework a development that would later influence the framing of Article 46 of the Indian Constitution. The legacy of these early reform efforts continues to resonate in the ongoing pursuit of caste equity and empowerment in modern India. Ultimately, the initiatives of this period serve as a testament to the transformative power of collective action, reformist leadership, and governmental responsibility in reshaping the socio-economic destiny of historically oppressed communities.

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