



Annihilation of Caste in Tamil Nadu (Before And After 1947): Challenges and Perspectives

Dr. R. Chandrasekar

Assistant Professor, Department of Law/School of Legal Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu.

chandrasekarr@cutn.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

Caste is not a newly emerged phenomenon, but is known to India since Vedic period. There is a shift in the paradigm of the nature of the practice of casteism since Vedic period. Usually, the conception of the casteism maintains that it is practiced by higher caste community against a lower caste. At present, this concept has been widened into increasing number of sub-castes. As per Varna system, there is a hierarchy in the caste system, viz. Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras. At present, there emerged hierarchy within each head. Though Constitution and several other Statutes have aimed to eradicate the casteism, still it has not reached its goal. Rather, at present, it has even proved to be the contrary as if there is no boundary to casteism. This paper will initially trace the history of casteism in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu before and after 1947. Thereafter, this paper will deal with the recent trends in casteism and the challenges in eradicating the same. Furthermore, it will focus on the constitutional mandate of annihilation of caste and its efficacy. Finally, this paper will attempt to find a solution to annihilate casteism from the society.

INTRODUCTION

Caste is a well renowned term since Vedic period. It emerged through the Varna System, *i.e.*, the hierarchy of the class of people based on their traits. It is believed to have been evolved to differentiate people based on their profession. However, the paradigm shift has been there to differentiate people to



discriminate them. Literatures such as, *Manusmriti*, *Ramayanam*, *Mahabaratham*, etc., have contained deliberate episodes of the practice of casteism. There are various facets of conceptions on caste and casteism. It is believed that, caste is not a bad notion *per se*, but casteism is. Caste is meant to identify a person on the basis of his/ her antecedents (community/ group). Rather, Casteism would differentiate people to discriminate or ill-treat them. To sum up, caste is a material; casteism is an application of caste to discriminate a person. Not all caste leads to such application, but some are exempted. For example, Brahmin is higher in hierarchy, Vaishya and Kshatriya occupy the middle wherein Shudra is considered lower. Out of the above segments, Shudra is considered most vulnerable in the hands of the other three castes. For Shudra, caste is a curse and for the other three it turns to be a blessing. However, at present, there emerged hierarchy within each head as the structure of castes has tremendously evolved through several centuries. To understand, within Brahmin community there is a series of sub-castes; within Kshatriya there is; and so on. Notably, Brahmin community is considered higher in status and others are inferior to them. In the same way, for Vaishya, other two, such as Kshatriya and Shudra are considered lower. Similarly, for Shudras, the other three have higher status. This hierarchy has evolved to manifold so as to consider some sects within each Varna is considered either superior or inferior.

The discrimination based on casteism in the society is still continuing in spite of having stringent laws in India. Though Constitution and several other Statutes have contained provisions that proscribely practise casteism in any quarter, still implementation is considered to be weak in its real sense. Rather, at present, this practice has widened, *i.e.*, The Seattle Municipal Code (United States of America), has introduced an Ordinance to include caste as discrimination one of the prohibited acts. (Masih, 2023). It shows casteism could travel beyond borders. Hence, there is a doubt whether the aspirations of the framers of the Constitution really turned fruitful in the verge of eradicating casteism in India or not. Ironically, it appears to be in letter and not in spirit that casteism must be overthrown from the society at any cost.

This piece of paper will scrutinize the above aspect in various measures. Initially, this paper will trace the history of casteism in India, particularly in Tamil Nadu before and after 1947. Thereafter, this paper will deal with the recent trends in casteism and the challenges in eradicating the same. Furthermore, it will focus on the constitutional mandate of annihilation of caste and its efficacy. Finally, this paper will attempt to find a solution to annihilate casteism from the society.

Casteism in the Tamil society has intruded as it so in the other societies in India. More than the region or geographical identification, caste is known with the emergence of the Vedic period. It



rooted on the foundation of the controversial Varna system during the Vedic period. Having rooted in the ancient times, it passed on to India from the Indo-European invaders during second millennium BCE. (Smith, 1994). Similarly, in the book ‘the Caste Question in India’, Anuradha Ghandy has described three periods of the origin and development of the caste, *viz.*, Vedic period (1500 B.C. – 500 B.C.); period from 500 B.C to 4th Century A.D.; period from 4th Century A.D. onwards. (Ghandy, n.d.) Out of these three significant epochs, casteism (*jati*) is said to have been emerged during the third phase stringently. However, during the copper age, *i.e.* even before the Aryan-European invasion, matrilineal social organizations were found with certain class of people with different socio- economic and cultural identities. (Ghandy, n.d.) Thereafter, only during 1500 B.C. patrilineal social organization entered the country through Aryan-Europeans. (Ghandy, n.d.) Through their rival meetings then and there, of both the matrilineal and patrilineal social organisations, Varna system has had emerged with four divisions, *viz.*, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. (Ghandy, n.d.) Followed by the emergence of Varna system, the emergence of the concept of State has also contributed much to the discrimination among the people. However, it has been vehemently opposed with the emergence of Lokayata, Mahavir, Buddha and similar personalities and their ideologues. (Ghandy, n.d.)

Besides State formation in the rest of the South India, Pallava’s emergence during the 575 AD has marked the beginning of such a kind in Tamil Nadu, where Brahminism were encouraged and supported by the creation of Brahmin villages. (Ghandy, n.d.) Eventually, in India, with the help of Britishers, Brahmins had played various key roles in the Government. Having realized about their hierarchical influences on the society, it was notably during the British period, in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, several movements have opposed the Brahminical ideologue.

Some References

Among others, Nangeli during the early nineteenth century was a notable personality stood against the caste discrimination. Nangeli belonged to Ezhava Community in Travancore State opposed the stringent ‘Mulakkaram Tax’, also known as ‘breast tax’. She, in agitation against such tax, cut her breast and offered in place of the tax. This incident had created a shocking atmosphere wherein the King, Sreemolam Thirunal of Travancore State withdrew such tax imposition of “Mulakkaram Tax” out of the fear of agitation among the people. (Mehrotra, 2022) However the fact that the Dalit women were not allowed to wear upper-cloth in front of upper caste people and the withdrawal of the tax remains temporary in nature, later in 1959, the Travancore King granted right to tie cloth around their upper-body in a different manner. (Mehrotra, 2022).



Ayyothidas Pandithar, Subramaniya Bharathiyar, E.V. R. in Tamil Nadu had contributed much to the annihilation of caste in the society. This had been further carried forward by the framers of the Constitution, especially Dr. Ambedkar by accommodating provisions ranging from Article 14 – 17 in the Constitution among others. At present, caste is mingled in the society wherein one cannot avail any Government concession without being identified as one belongs to such caste. This could be seen in the Community Certificate issued by the respective State Governments. Though the issuance of Community Certificate is towards providing privileged status/ concession while applying for higher studies or employment, the Other backward castes (In Tamil Nadu, community certificate is issued mainly under various categories, viz., Forward Caste (FC), Backward Classes (BC), Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). These certificates can be utilized by the beneficiaries while they apply for any educational institutions or employment opportunities within the ambit of State Government. In addition, Other Backward Classes (OBC) certificate is also issued, but it is for the purpose of applying for any educational institutions or employment purpose within the purview of Central Government. In this article, the author has mentioned ‘Other Backward Caste’ in order to denote the people belong to the middle castes which are placed below the Brahmin and above the Shudra. However, the concept of ‘Other Backward Classes’ also has different meaning. Even, Scheduled Caste is considered Backward while it was applied in the real sense and spirit.) including scheduled castes are faced discrimination. Through Community Certificate one can easily detect one’s caste identity to discriminate him/ her. Also, it appears to be difficult to separate caste from the society unless stringent or bold decisions are taken by the Government. While the society could not make their minds to give up casteism, obviously, Government should step in to eradicate it.

Some say that, caste is not a controversial area *per se*, but only the discrimination based on it.

RECENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN THE ERADICATION OF CASTE

Before delving inside the challenges in the eradicating casteism, it is pertinent to deal with the definition of caste in the first phase.

Definition (Scholarly) of Caste

There are various definitions for the caste that exists in the world and few seek attention, as per Dr. Ambedkar, which is given below.

Mr. Senart, a French authority, defines a caste as —a close corporation, in theory at any rate rigorously hereditary: equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation, including a chief and a



Council, meeting on occasion in assemblies of more or less plenary authority and joining together at certain festivals: bound together by common occupations, which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution, and ruling the Members by the exercise of jurisdiction, the extent of which varies, but which succeeds in making the authority of the community more felt by the sanction of certain penalties and, above all, by final irrevocable exclusion from the group.

Mr. Nesfield defines a caste as —a class of community which disowns any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community.

According to Sir H. Risley, —a caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation, claiming common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine, professing to follow the same professional callings and are regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community.

Dr. Ketkar defines caste as —a social group having two characteristics: (i) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. (Moon, 1979)

Dr. Ambedkar has opined that the above definitions contain no substance as to the real caste narrative except Dr. Ketkar — prohibition of Intermarriage and Membership by Autogeny are two independent precepts of caste — but it is not, because those two are two sides of the same coin. (Moon, 1979, pp. 7-8) For Dr. Ambedkar — Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. (Moon, 1979, p. 9) Also, he has placed his argument on the basis that the only characteristic of caste is endogamy in nature. (Moon, 1979, p. 9) However, in India, exogamy seems prevalent and endogamy a foreign element. The upper caste has managed the endogamous marriage throughout the ages through various means that include *sati*. It is pertinent to deal with the challenges in the contemporary India including the above concepts of endogamy and exogamy marriage.

Challenges

There are complex of challenges that contest this issue of casteism in Tamil Nadu. This issue is tied up to certain level that it becomes stringent to untie it till this era of globalization. If Varna system had not posed threat to the unification of the society, these challenges would not have arrived. Also, casteism



played and still remains a menace in the society that hinders the human development at every stage. Among other challenges, below are few that need attention at this juncture.

Matrimonial Agencies

The foremost challenge of the society in eradicating the caste system will be to change the mindset of the people to accept exogamy marriages, *i.e.*, inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. Government of Tamil Nadu has had recognised Self-Respect Marriages and Inter-Caste Marriages in order to encourage the exogamy-nature of the society. However, the endogamy nature of marriage is indirectly encouraged by the Government by allowing matrimonial agencies to have separate matrimonial sites for different castes, such as Tamil Matrimony, Vanniyar Matrimony, Nadar Matrimony, Brahmin Matrimony, Naidu Matrimony, etc. These are all illustrative and not exhaustive. Some exceptions are there, notably is Periyar Matrimony that encourages inter-caste or inter-religious marriages. Government's initiative to encourage Self-Respect marriages and Inter-Caste marriages could be seen as a step forward in eradicating the caste system in the society, but it needs to further the movement in a rapid and conscionable manner. In this line, respective Governments may prohibit such matrimonial agencies from functioning that promote casteism in the society. Furthermore, mindset of the people, must, in this juncture has to change so as to accept bride or groom from various caste and religions.

Easy Identification

The next challenge would be the easy-identification of the Scheduled caste persons by their appearance. Once, Dr. Ambedkar had advised, during Mahad Satyagraha, the women be dressed and wear light weighted jewelry. So that, they may look similar to other higher caste women. (Biswas, 2024). Or, they may not be identified as a lower caste woman. In reality, a person in rural areas could be easily and deliberately identified to which caste such person belongs to. This may be due to their poor economic condition or they refuse to accept the normal life as other caste people follow. If it is their poor economic condition, then the fundamental nature of their livelihood must change. This is possible through providing education and employment to all notable persons. Also, stringent attempt must be made to shift the Schedule caste people to be placed in the urban areas. In another way, the demographic change may be made in the dwelling places. For instance, in a village, a new layout must be created to mingle the people belonging to different castes that must include Brahmin community as well.

Community Certificate

In continuation with the above identification aspect, issuance of community certificate must be



withdrawn by the Government. Instead, certificate in the name of ‘social-certificate’ must be issued on the basis of their economic background. However, the politicisation of the issuance of community certificate on the basis of castes hinders the process of the real social development. For this, to support the above, politicians urge for power-sharing in the bureaucracy and in the politics. This may be due to the understanding that by providing such powers in the bureaucracy and in the politics, the social status of the down-trodden community will be uplifted.

For instance, taking into consideration that power-sharing in the above fields is possible only by the issuance of community certificate based on the caste, it would lead to severe consequences as alleged by the developed community. It is the humble submission of this author, that is, this power-sharing mechanism would fail the concept of eradication or annihilation of caste from the society. Still, their identity would remain as it is forever and discrimination will again emerge in a different form or tactics as the thought process of the society changes from time to time. If really Government wants to annihilate the caste from the society, initiatives are required to make the people to forget the caste to which they belong. Unless otherwise it is possible, then it becomes difficult to eradicate or annihilate the caste from the society. Therefore, the very idea of issuing community certificate must change to the economic condition of the people rather on the basis of caste. To support this argument, in Karnataka, there found improvement in the cases of suicide that as the decrease in the usage of the word ‘suicide’ among the people. The same can be applied in the present problem that if the usage of the word ‘caste’, may be in any form, could result affirmative in its eradication.

A Need for Bold Action Against Casteism

Notably, still in the rural part of the Tamil Nadu, double-tumbler system prevails. In addition, Government could not break the untouchable wall built to divide the upper caste people from the lower caste. Implementation of the available laws by the governmental authorities could ease the situation. However, this is not happening in the fullest form. These incidents could not be prevented at present, may be due to the reason of vote politics. While the election is about to hit, political parties used to provide seats to their cadres based upon the caste to which he or she belongs. How can one be expected from the same political party that he/ she would fight against the casteism after they come to power? This fallacy turns to be an obstacle in eradicating the caste to the wider extent and discourages the movement in toto. Political parties are required to select the candidates to contest election based on the performance only, but not on the basis of caste or creed except for wherever it is necessary. Notably in this regard, reservations to the constituencies are exempted. However, this must also be withdrawn by the



Government. Because, there are incidents where the elected President for the Panchayat had faced discrimination (forced to sit on the floor while other caste persons are sitting on the chairs in any official gatherings).

Another incident happened in the Melpathi Village in Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu. In this village, people belong to Other Backward community had restrained the Scheduled Caste people to enter the temple. This is highly a case of caste discrimination and untouchability committed by mass population within the village. This has created chaos for a while and finally the Governmental authorities have closed and sealed the temple in the pretext of riot or clashes likely to happen between the people belonging to different castes. It was expected from the people that instead of closing the temple, the enforcement authorities must have booked the culprits who practiced casteism, under severe charges of caste discrimination. Also, it was expected that the culprits should have been arrested and put behind the bars for practicing untouchability. Notably, this is a case between the people belonging to Other Backward and Scheduled Caste. Therefore, it is evident that the casteism is been prevalent and practiced by the Other Backward caste against Scheduled caste (the shift is made from Upper caste against the lower caste to Other Backward class against the Scheduled caste), which is a slight deviation from the conventional way of discrimination. The above incident is for illustrative, and increasing number of similar incidents have been taking place throughout India. Actually, this behaviour could only be seen between Brahmins and other castes.

In common perception, Brahmins dominate other castes who are placed down as per the Varna system; Kshatriya dominate the others below in the hierarchy; Vaishyas and so on. At present, it got transformed to the stage where within the denominations there arises conflict. For instance, there is a fight between Vadagalai and Thengalai Brahmin community; it continues in every hierarchy of castes in the Varna system. A bold action is required to tackle these caste menaces from the society, otherwise it may flourish in various dimensions in the future.

Education

Education is a vital tool to eradicate casteism from the society. It provides awareness among the people in their earlier stage of childhood regarding the notoriety of practicing casteism. However, in the recent times, casteism is rooted in the minds of school-going children. In Tirunelveli District in Tamil Nadu, students wear caste related wrist bands to school in order to be identified that they belong to certain castes. (Jesudasan, 2024). This creates hatred among the young minds even at their childhood days which develops as they grow. This could be possible only with the unscrupulous influence or indoctrination of



their parents. Young minds are polluted in the early stage, so that it continues throughout their life. Government must lay policies that educate students in the schools and colleges to treat their peers in a dignified manner. Also, punishment must be given to the parents whose children practice casteism. The school or college management must have a vigilant check on the student's behaviour and this must be rechecked by the Government in the regular intervals. This is one aspect.

The other view is to send the children, belonging to the down-trodden community, to school. In most of the rural areas, parents hesitate or refuse to send their children to school due to various reasons that include socio, economic, cultural conditions, etc. Some parents could not afford to schools or colleges due to financial constrains which must be tackled by the Government. Though there enacted a Statute to provide free education (Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009) to the children aged from 6 to 14, there is no proper implementation. By providing education to the children belonging to the down-trodden community, they would get a decent employment. Moreover, their economic status, along with social status, will also improve. As aspired by Dr. Ambedkar, the social stratification will reduce among the unequal and eventually it leads to the society of equals. There is a need for a policy level approach to achieve this goal.

ANNIHILATION OF CASTE AND THE EFFICACY OF THE CONSTITUTION OF INDIA

Our forefathers of the Constitution had in mind, the very notion of the annihilation of caste from the society, while codifying it. However, as a trial and error, in the name of caste, the concept of reservation was introduced in order to uplift the down-trodden community. Initially, it was set to provide reservation for the period of 15 years the needy people who were categorized under Scheduled list. It was estimated that by this period, the social status of the people would improvise and the requirement for further reservations will come to an end. However, unfortunately, it becomes solid so that the reservation system will remain in the society for ever. It is not to blame anyone, rather to change the minds of the people who still practice casteism in order to oppress and suppress the development of the Scheduled Castes. As have already mentioned, reservation under the pretext of caste (rather than the economic background) is also one of the factors where the casteism has deep rooted in the society.

To start with, Articles 14 of the Constitution of India deals with the human beings who need to treated equal, which reads as, "The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India". Followed by Article 14, Article 15 reads as:

15. Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. —



- (1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.
- (2) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—
 - (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or
 - (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.
- (3) Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.
- (4) Nothing in this article or in clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the State from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes.
- (5) Nothing in this article or in sub-clause (g) of clause (1) of article 19 shall prevent the State from making any special provision, by law, for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes in so far as such special provisions relate to their admission to educational institutions including private educational institutions, whether aided or unaided by the State, other than the minority educational institutions referred to in clause (1) of article 30.
- (6) Nothing in this article or sub-clause (g) of clause (1) of article 19 or clause (2) of article 29 shall prevent the State from making:
 - (a) any special provision for the advancement of any economically weaker sections of citizens other than the classes mentioned in clauses (4) and (5); and
 - (b) any special provision for the advancement of any economically weaker sections of citizens other than the classes mentioned in clauses (4) and (5) in so far as such special provisions relate to their admission to educational institutions including private educational institutions, whether aided or unaided by the State, other than the minority educational institutions referred to in clause (1) of article 30, which in the case of reservation would be in addition to the existing reservations and subject to a maximum of ten per cent. of the total seats in each category.



Explanation: For the purposes of this article and article 16, “economically weaker sections” shall be such as may be notified by the State from time to time on the basis of family income and other indicators of economic disadvantage.

Article 15 contains two aspects namely the prohibition of certain activities and the protection of certain category of people from the society. Clause 1 speaks about discrimination in the hands of State and Clause 2 in general. Sub clause (a) of Clause 2 speaks about the prohibition of discrimination in accessing the shops, restaurants, hotels and place of public entertainment. Especially in the present situation, with regard to the place of public entertainment, ‘discrimination’ is clearly visible. For instance, denial of permission to a Schedule Tribe family (belonging to Narikuravar community) from entering an entertainment premise (the Rohini Cinema theatre) at Chennai has posed a serious threat to this provision. (Bureau, 2023). Sub clause (b) of clause 2 speaks about the liberty to the — use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public. Similarly, an inhumane incident took place in Vengaivayal village (Annavasal Block) in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu wherein the human excretion was set to mix with the water tank shook the entire country. This menial act was committed by the person belonging to Other Backward community in order to contaminate the water tank used by the Scheduled caste people in the same village. (Desk, 2022) The probe is yet to be solved by the investigating agency. In this globalized era, it is a shameful act and behaviour that the people are discriminated on the basis of caste, religion, etc. Even after seven decades after the codification of the Constitution, still it exists somewhere in the country in some forms. It ignites a misconception among the scholars whether really, the step towards the annihilation of caste has failed? Also, whether there is a need to amend the Constitution or not in order to impart a different formula to annihilate the caste from the society.

Finally, it is pertinent to focus on the core aspect of the annihilation of caste that present in Article 17 of the Constitution that reads as: — Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of Untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law. The drafters of the Constitution felt the inclusion of this provision necessary to impart into the minds of the people, of the prohibition, of the untouchability in any form. For instance, the prohibition of: double tumbler system, restraining from entering cinema theatres, restraining down-trodden community to access to the temple, etc. Ironically, these practices are still visible in the country.

CONCLUSION

There are various incidents related to the discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, etc., that shook



the country in the recent past. Also, such happenings could be foreseen in the future as the people mindset have not changed even after 7 decades have passed since India got Independence. There is a doubt as to the codification of the Constitution, to say whether, the intention of the drafters of the Constitution really thought of annihilating the caste from the society or not. Or the representatives of the people have misled or failed in such aspirations? The above mentioned are few incidents that are brought in the lime light and there could be many such incidents which have not been exposed or reported to the outside world. Notably, casteism is not only present in India, but in every part of the World, may be in different form. There is no doubt as to the efficacy of the Constitution in annihilating the caste from the society and the drafters had worked enormously. This seven decades is not sufficient to do so because, casteism has not emerged in a century or two, but since ages. Blame against the Government will not solve the problem of discrimination, rather the mindset of the people should also be changed and it is possible through the liberal policies of the Government.

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