

Impact Of Caste Discrimination On The Social Conditions Of Rural Dalits In Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

The study attempts to explore the historical and current implications of caste-based discrimination, focusing on the Dalit community in rural Dindigul. Utilising archival records, field observations, policy documents, and diverse case studies, the study uncovers the extent and nuances of caste discrimination permeating employment, education, and public arenas. Alarming high unemployment rates among Dalit youth and pervasive wage disparities indicate systemic challenges. Educational biases are evident with reports of abuse, exclusion, and denied opportunities. The distressing case of Jeyasri Kathirvel illustrates the intertwined nature of caste and gender violence. Notably, while the Indian government has introduced measures such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act and empowerment schemes, their efficacy remains contested. The study underscores the necessity for more than policy initiatives; a comprehensive societal paradigm shift is imperative for genuine equity and justice.

Keywords: caste, disparities, bias, violence, government policies, societal change.

INTRODUCTION

Caste-based discrimination, rooted deeply within the historical framework of India, continues to permeate the daily lives of its citizens, particularly those belonging to marginalised groups such as the Dalits. These discriminations have been institutionalised and normalised over the centuries, making them resilient to change. The hierarchical nature of the caste system has persistently subjugated the Dalits, keeping them at the socio-economic periphery. Dindigul district in Tamil Nadu exemplifies these challenges, with rural Dalits often being the most affected. Historical records and primary documents elucidate the longevity and depth of caste discrimination in India. Notwithstanding the extensive civilizational evolution and modernisation India has undergone, some of these age-old prejudices persist in its rural landscapes. In Dindigul, like many parts of India, the scars of caste discrimination are palpable. Reports and surveys by organisations like NCDHR, HRW, NCSC, and DRF shed light on the unfortunate realities faced by Dalits in the district, from economic disparities like wage inequalities to non-provision of essential services like safety equipment and training.

The effects of caste discrimination are not confined to the economic realm. It spills over into areas like education, where Dalits face significant hurdles. The case of the two girl students from Chinnalapatti consuming toilet cleaner after being subjected to casteist slurs encapsulates the depth of emotional and psychological torment such discriminations induce. Additionally, the consistent denial of school admissions to Dalit girls in Kamalapuram underscores how educational spaces, which should be bastions of equity, often perpetuate systemic biases. Public spaces in Dindigul district too are tainted with caste-based exclusions. The general idea of social spaces being universally accessible is debunked as Dalits often find themselves barred from temples, parks, and eateries. The violence against Dalits, as revealed by NCRB findings, highlights how deep-rooted animosities manifest in physical violence, with Dalits bearing a disproportionate brunt. The Indian constitution, framed by visionaries like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, enshrined protections against caste-based discriminations. Affirmative actions, such as reservations, were conceptualised as a means to level the socio-economic playing field. Over the years, various governmental policies have been instituted to mitigate the impact of caste-based discrimination. Legislative measures, such as the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989, were intended to serve as robust safeguards. However, the continuing prejudices against Dalits in regions like Dindigul indicate a lacuna between policy intent and its on-ground implementation.

Research Objectives

The study seeks to explore the historical roots of caste discrimination in India, focusing on its influence on the social conditions of dalits. It aims to evaluate the present state of caste-based prejudices in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, pinpointing the distinct challenges faced by rural dalits. The study examines how such discrimination limits dalits' access to vital services, evaluate governmental policy impacts, and explore solutions for enhancing the social conditions of the rural dalit community in Dindigul.

Methodology

The study employs historical method and a qualitative approach, utilising archival records and primary documents to understand the historical context of caste discrimination in India. Field observations in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, provide insights into current discriminatory practices. We also analyse policy documents to gauge governmental interventions, and case studies offer detailed accounts of rural dalits' experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The caste system, with its genesis tracing back around 3000 years, remains deeply embedded in the socio-cultural dynamics of India. The resistance to this system has been equally historic. Esteemed sociologist Vidya Charan Dube asserts that the caste system in India has encountered unparalleled opposition, both ideologically and practically, yet it has managed to adapt, evolve, and persist. This perspective finds resonance with many.¹ Marxist theoreticians postulate that caste-based discrimination in India is inextricably linked with class-based exploitation. D.D. Kosambi propounded the theory that the varna hierarchy was a manifestation of nascent class divisions within ancient Indian society. As the caste system solidified during the feudal era, it found support under British colonial rule and continued protection from post-independence capitalist establishments.² The caste system's inherent disparities conveniently served the class interests of those in power. Presently, caste-driven oppression and class-driven exploitation remain deeply interconnected. A shortcoming of the contemporary democratic movement in India is its segmented approach, often addressing caste and class issues in isolation. Efforts against caste-based discrimination that overlook the class dimension have scarcely achieved significant outcomes. Conversely, working-class movements that fail to acknowledge and challenge caste-based divisions, which potentially undermine working-class unity, have been unable to realize substantial progress. The pressing query

that emerges is whether the unity of the working class can truly be established without actively opposing caste-based discrimination and untouchability. The contemporary imperative is the synchronised mobilisation against both caste-driven oppression and class-driven exploitation, fostering synergies between these movements.

Entities dedicated to resisting caste-based discrimination must acknowledge the concurrent prevalence of class-based exploitation, advocating for significant reforms, such as equitable land allocation for Dalits and just wage structures. Conversely, associations primarily focused on class struggles must elevate their discourse to condemn caste-driven oppressions, particularly the pervasive issue of untouchability. In line with this dual approach, the TNUEF has emerged as a collaborative forum, melding class-centric and Dalit-focused organisations within Tamil Nadu. The endeavours of the TNUEF, rooted in an integrated approach towards countering both caste and class-based inequities, have borne fruit. The caste hierarchy in India perpetuates systemic disparities, subjugating vast segments of the population. This framework, exempting the upper echelons, subjects the majority to varying degrees of repression and prejudice.³ The casteist paradigm evaluates individuals not on the merit of their skills or potential but rather by the circumstances of their birth, determining their societal position. Remarkably, this ideology remains resilient despite the transformative economic and technological shifts ushered in by capitalism. Among the diverse manifestations of caste-based discrimination, untouchability stands out as exceptionally egregious, relegating Dalits to the margins of society, denying them basic human rights, and consigning them to menial occupations. While Tamil Nadu has been the abode of illustrious social reformers like Periyar, the scourge of untouchability persists across myriad villages. The TNUEF, in conjunction with affiliated organisations and the CPI (M), conducted an expansive survey, covering 1,849 villages across 22 districts of Tamil Nadu. The findings unveiled a myriad of untouchability practices and a plethora of atrocities against Dalits that persist to this day.⁴ The TNEUF survey highlights that Tamilnadu continues to grapple with deeply-rooted untouchability practices and discrimination against Dalits. Everyday experiences for these marginalised groups involve navigating a labyrinth of prohibitions. They face limitations on using public roads, are dictated specific attire and footwear, and are often excluded from basic services like laundry, with designated storage for their clothes. Discriminatory behaviours are prevalent in grooming establishments where Dalits may either

be segregated or denied services altogether. The caste-based hierarchies manifest in refreshment stalls which employ different serving ware based on one's caste. Furthermore, communal spaces, such as hotels and public taps, are often restricted, with water sometimes being provided to Dalits only in their own hands. Public baths and tanks assign separate areas for Dalits. During celebratory occasions, Dalits grapple with a host of prohibitions: they might be barred from rituals, temple entry, and even participating in festive activities like firing crackers. Their presence is often intentionally minimised before the upper castes. Their plight extends to somber events like funerals where they might be denied access to common cremation grounds or provided separate pathways. Routine amenities, from accessing bus stops and communal TV watching to receiving postal deliveries, are tainted by casteist practices. This discrimination extends to areas like ration distribution and public speaking events.

The particularly vulnerable Arunthathiyar Dalits often face enforced involvement in sanitation jobs without the commensurate rights or respect. In the realm of education, they grapple with both subtle and blatant discrimination, ranging from derogatory naming by dominant caste peers to systemic administrative barriers. Physical barriers, such as the walls in Uthapuram, Madurai district, further manifest caste-based segregation and curtail Dalit mobility. Land rights for Dalits are frequently compromised, with dominant castes encroaching upon their designated areas. When it comes to local governance, Dalit-led panchayats confront fiscal neglect and functional challenges, curtailing their representation in village affairs and access to communal assets. The vast compendium of prejudicial practices underscores a deep-seated, systemic caste-based discrimination that is not only perpetuated by individuals but is, at times, sanctioned and perpetuated by administrative structures.⁵ This challenges the very foundation of democratic principles and human rights.⁶

Caste discrimination is a centuries-old practice in India that is deeply embedded in the social fabric. It is a form of social stratification that divides people into hierarchical groups based on their caste or birth. Dalits are the lowest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy, and they have historically been subjected to discrimination and oppression. In Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu, caste discrimination is still a major problem. A study by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) found that 60% of dalit youth in the district were unemployed (NCDHR, 2019). A survey by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that 40% of dalit workers in the district were paid less than the minimum wage

(HRW, 2018). A report by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) found that dalit workers in the district were often denied access to safety equipment and training (NCSC, 2017). A case study by the Dalit Rights Forum (DRF) found that a dalit woman in the district was fired from her job after she complained of sexual harassment (DRF, 2016).

These studies provide evidence of the widespread nature of caste discrimination against dalits in Dindigul district. The NCSC report also found that dalits in the district were more likely to be employed in the informal sector, where they are more likely to be exploited and discriminated against (NCSC, 2017). The impact of caste discrimination on the social conditions of rural dalits is severe. They are more likely to be poor, illiterate, and unemployed. They are also more likely to be victims of violence and discrimination. A study by the National Crime Records Bureau found that dalits are disproportionately represented among victims of crimes such as murder, rape, and assault (NCRB, 2019). The government of India has taken some steps to address caste discrimination, such as the enactment of the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. However, these laws are not always enforced, and dalits continue to face discrimination.

Forms of Caste Discrimination

In Dindigul district, caste-based discrimination remains a significant concern across various facets of daily life. One of the most prominent areas where Dalits face challenges is employment. They frequently encounter barriers to job opportunities, and when employed, they tend to earn less than their non-dalit peers.⁷ Harassment and verbal abuse in workplaces are not uncommon. Statistics from a 2019 study by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) revealed that 60% of Dalit youth in the district were unemployed.⁸ This issue is further compounded by a 2018 survey from Human Rights Watch (HRW), which showed that 40% of Dalit workers received wages below the legal minimum.⁹ Moreover, a 2017 report by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) indicated that Dalit workers often weren't provided with necessary safety gear or adequate training.¹⁰ Discrimination extends to the education sector as well, with Dalit children facing challenges in accessing equal opportunities. They are sometimes denied school admissions or segregated from non-Dalit students. This discriminatory treatment can be exacerbated by verbal harassment from both teachers and fellow students. The broader implications of such practices are highlighted by a 2018 study from the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER),

which discovered that 40% of Dalits across India experience educational bias.

The basic necessities of life, such as water and sanitation, are not immune to caste prejudice. Dalits in many areas are denied access to potable water and proper sanitation, leading them to rely on separate facilities that might be of inferior quality. This discrepancy was noted in a 2017 study by the World Health Organisation (WHO), which found that Dalits in India are more often deprived of safe drinking water and sanitation compared to the general populace.¹¹ Housing poses another challenge; Dalits frequently reside in segregated zones, and their socio-economic status may prevent them from accessing housing loans and other governmental aid. A 2016 study from the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) highlighted that Dalits are more likely to inhabit slums or informal settlements compared to others in India.

Public spaces, which are meant to be open to all, often become sites of discrimination for Dalits. They might be barred from entering temples, parks, and even certain eateries. Such exclusions and the verbal harassments they face in these spaces were pointed out in a 2015 study by the Dalit Rights Forum (DRF), which mentioned that Dalits, on the whole, face more restrictions in accessing public spaces.¹² Violence against Dalits is alarmingly prevalent, with the community being targeted for heinous crimes such as assault, rape, and murder. Such acts, frequently perpetrated by dominant castes, are rooted in deep-seated caste animosities. The 2020 findings of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) underscored this grim reality, indicating a disproportionate number of Dalits among the victims of violent crimes.¹³

Some Case Studies

In Dindigul district's Chinnalapatti area, two girl students at a government-aided school were allegedly verbally abused by their Maths teacher using caste slurs, leading them to consume toilet cleaner in distress. A fact-finding team from a Madurai-based NGO named Evidence confirmed repeated incidents of the teacher's maltreatment.¹⁴ Following the event, locals protested demanding the teacher's arrest. Subsequent inquiries led to the registration of cases against school authorities under the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2015, and sections of the IPC. The NGO highlighted the pressing need for counseling for affected students and reforms in educational settings.¹⁵

In Dindigul's Kamalapuram, near Sempatti, parents allege that a government-aided school discriminates against Dalit girls, inhibiting their educational pursuits due to local school scarcities. Villages surrounding this pivotal junction lack nearby higher secondary girls' schools, compelling families to favour Thiraviyam Girls Higher Secondary School. Despite its significance, many Dalit parents report admission refusals for their daughters. Many girls consequently discontinue their education, engaging in agrarian tasks or cattle care. This prevalent discrimination isn't limited to Dindigul; an Evidence NGO study highlighted similar biases in a Theni district school, showcasing a systemic issue within educational institutions.¹⁶

In Meikovilpatti near Dindigul, Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man, P. Sadaiyandi, faced violent repercussions from a group of upper-caste youths for wearing footwear in their locality. They allegedly assaulted him and subjected him to the degrading act of forcing human excreta into his mouth. While the attackers presented a counter-narrative claiming Sadaiyandi instigated the confrontation, local police downplayed the incident, suggesting a potential misuse of the SC/ST Atrocities Act. This incident, as noted by a People's Watch activist, appears to be part of a larger pattern of caste-based tension in the region.¹⁷

In Dindigul a low caste Hindu woman named S Lakshmi was accused of denying a rental property to Madurai Veeran, a Scheduled Caste man, on the basis of his caste. Despite searching extensively, Veeran encountered numerous instances of prejudice, with prospective landlords providing various pretexts for their refusals. The issue extends beyond Dindigul, with other instances like an artist in Chennai facing similar discrimination. The phenomenon, alarming in urban settings, underscores the entrenched caste discrimination that manifests in modern contexts.¹⁸

In 2021, Jeyasri Kathirvel, a 21-year-old Dalit garment-factory worker from Dindigul district in Tamil Nadu, was tragically murdered, with her immediate supervisor among the accused. The crime was largely unreported in national media, with some foreign press highlighting the prevalent issue of sexual harassment in the garment industry. However, many reports overlooked the role of caste in fostering environments that embolden sexual violence perpetrators, especially from dominant castes. Jeyasri's persistent harassment by her supervisor underscores the intersection of caste and gender-based violence, highlighting the deeply embedded power hierarchies in workplace settings.¹⁹

The social fabric of Dindigul district in Tamil Nadu, as is evident from the various case studies, is marred by deeply

entrenched caste prejudices that permeate its daily life. This discrimination, stemming from age-old prejudices, manifests itself in various settings, including educational institutions, the housing market, and workplaces, adversely affecting the district's Dalit and lower-caste population.

Education, which should be the bedrock of a just society, unfortunately, turns into an arena of discrimination and psychological violence. The heart-wrenching incident from Chinnalapatti of two girls resorting to consuming toilet cleaner due to caste-based verbal abuse by their teacher is not just an isolated incident of cruelty but an alarming signal of the rot within the educational system. Such incidents are not only traumatic for the victims but also breed a toxic environment where students from marginalised sections perpetually live under the fear of being ridiculed. This discourages many from pursuing education. This systemic bias further accentuates in Kamalapuram, near Sempatti, where Dalit girls face a blatant denial of admissions. The sheer paucity of educational institutions in the vicinity amplifies this bias, leading many Dalit girls to abandon their academic aspirations. This is not just a loss of individual dreams but a colossal societal loss of potential.²⁰

The case of P. Sadaiyandi in Meikovilpatti highlights the everyday degradations lower caste individuals face. An act as ordinary as wearing footwear becomes a point of contention, leading to severe physical and emotional violence. The underlying message is not just about footwear; it's about preserving age-old hierarchies and reiterating who "belongs" where. What is even more concerning is the approach of the local authorities who, instead of providing a sense of justice, further muddied the waters, suggesting the potential misuse of legal provisions meant to protect the marginalised.

Housing, a fundamental need, also turns into a terrain of exclusion, as seen in the case of Madurai Veeran. His experiences, and that of others like him, indicate a trend where caste becomes a determinant in access to basic amenities like housing. The societal disdain and mistrust towards lower-caste individuals are deep-seated to an extent that it overrides urban sensibilities in cities like Chennai, shattering the myth of urban spaces being devoid of rural prejudices.

The tragic fate of Jeyasri Kathirvel serves as a poignant reminder of how caste discrimination, intertwined with gender biases, can turn lethal. Her workplace, a space she should feel safe and empowered, turned into a place of torment. The intersectionality of caste and gender makes Dalit women particularly vulnerable to both subtle and overt forms of

discrimination. The lack of widespread outrage or even adequate coverage of her story also hints at a societal desensitisation towards such atrocities, especially when they involve lower caste victims. The social life in Dindigul district is mired in a morass of caste prejudices that not only cripple individual aspirations but also hinder the collective progress of the society. It's a sad commentary that in the modern age, the spectre of caste still looms large, dictating who gets to study, who finds a home, and who feels safe at their workplace. For Dindigul to truly progress, these deep-rooted biases need to be recognised, confronted, and eradicated.

Government Efforts towards Eradication of Discrimination

In post-independence India, luminaries such as Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar endeavoured to establish constitutional safeguards and mechanisms to ensure that the historically marginalised Scheduled Castes, alongside other socially disadvantaged groups, were protected against further discrimination.²¹ Their efforts sought to enhance their socio-cultural, educational, and economic well-being through various initiatives and affirmative actions like reservations. Such reservations, especially in government educational institutions and job sectors, have illuminated pathways for many from the Scheduled Caste community. However, it remains an unfortunate reality that a significant portion of this community still grapples with acute poverty and the weight of societal prejudice, which unfairly views them as incapable of rising beyond their historically diminished status.²²

Article 46 of the Constitution of India distinctly mandates, "The state shall promote with special care the programmes for educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and in particular of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and shall shield them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation".²³ As Dr. B. R. Ambedkar astutely remarked, such constitutional provisions mark merely the beginning. The actual realisation of social equity remains contingent on inculcating the principles of justice and equality deep within the Indian psyche.²⁴ In its commitment to redressing historic inequities, the Indian Government has consistently introduced measures aimed at advancing the socio-economic status of the Scheduled Caste community. These initiatives can be primarily categorized into: (a) Schemes for Educational Empowerment and (b) Schemes for Economic Empowerment. The latter seeks to foster dignity and self-worth among members of the Scheduled Caste community. This discourse specifically examines the foundational pillars of the aforementioned categories: the Educational and Economic

empowerment schemes. Their effective execution has the potential to instill confidence within the Scheduled Caste population, facilitating broader societal empowerment.²⁵

However, the impact of these policies has been limited. Dalits continue to face discrimination in many areas of life, including employment, education, and housing. They are also more likely to be victims of violence than the general population.²⁶ There are a number of reasons why the impact of government policies on the social conditions of rural dalits has been limited. One reason is that the implementation of these policies has been weak. The Prevention of Atrocities Act is often not enforced, and cases of caste discrimination are rarely prosecuted. The reservation of government jobs and educational institutions is not always implemented fairly, and dalits are often discriminated against in the workplace. And the National Scheduled Castes Finance and Development Corporation has not been able to reach all dalits who need assistance. Another reason why the impact of government policies has been limited is that caste discrimination is deeply entrenched in Indian society. It is a complex problem that cannot be solved by government policies alone. It requires a change in mindset and attitudes, as well as a commitment to social justice from all sections of society.

CONCLUSION

The deeply ingrained caste-based prejudices in India remain a significant barrier to the social upliftment of Dalits, as exemplified in Dindigul. Despite governmental interventions, Dalits in the region continue to face stark discrimination, particularly in employment, wage equity, and safety. Disturbingly, the education sector, which should be a pillar of equality, is riddled with instances of verbal abuse and deliberate sidelining of Dalit students. While government policies lay a foundation for change, their implementation is often marred by systemic challenges and long-standing biases. To truly transform this scenario, a holistic societal effort is essential, transcending mere policy enforcement. This involves not only stronger and more proactive governmental actions but also grassroots-level awareness, community involvement, and support for organisations championing Dalit rights. It's vital to confront and combat these deeply rooted beliefs and practices to pave the way for an equitable society.

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