

ORIGIN OF UNTOUCHABILITY - SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract

The origin of the Untouchables, even as the origin of untouchability, is a puzzle to the social historians. They put forth theories which are variance with one another. It is but natural because, in dealing not with a historic but a pre-historic community whose origin is hidden in the limbo of oblivion. To bring it to the limelight of history, one has to base his conclusions on circumstantial evidence rather than direct ones. Untouchability is a unique phenomenon in the Hindu society, having a special and significant meaning. It is indeed an Indian concept whose true import can be understood only in the Indian context. The term 'untouchability' in its Indian usage means much more than what it stands for. Ordinarily it denotes a particular condition of a man or a woman rendering him or her unfit for being touched by the other persons.

Key words: Untouchability, Aryans, Dravidians, Tamil, Pre-Dravidian.

Origin of Untouchability

The origin of untouchability in India has been a puzzle and it is a gigantic tree whose an enigma to all social historians. Branches have enveloped the entire length and breadth of India, From the Himalayas in the North to Kan̄iyakumari in the South. Its roots go far into the prehistoric past, about which we have no written records. Therefore, a number of conflicting theories have been advanced to explain its origin. But many of them are partial and tell only a part of the story. It is too big a problem to be dis- Posed of by one single explanation. Various factors, social, racial, religious and economic, acting simultaneously seem produced the complex phenomenon which is peculiar to the Hindu society¹.

Since untouchability is an all-India problem, a discussion of its origin cannot be confined to Tamil Nadu alone. Social and religious conditions prevailing in Northern India as revealed from ancient Sanskrit Literature have also to be taken into account. Only in such a wider perspective the origin of untouchability in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu, can be understood with greater accuracy and clarity². It must also be noted that the various factors responsible for the rise of untouchability were not the same for all the regions of India. Certain factors which are very significant with respect to the emergence of untouchability in certain areas become comparatively insignificant in the case of certain other areas and peoples. Though certain common elements can be found all over India, generalization is not always possible. Social Ostracism owing to the violation of caste rules and regulations, religious excommunication owing to heresy and wholesale exclusion of people performing certain occupations considered to be impure in one way or other seem to be the main causes of the phenomenon of untouchability. Generally the taboos that vitiated the society from time immemorial seem to have been at the basis of the evil³. In early Hindu, Jain and Buddhist writings whole groups of people are spoken of as unfit for association with the pure and the orthodox on the basis of their birth as well as the practice of certain tabooed customs and professions. Such people are generally denoted by the term *Candalas*.

In the question "Who were the Untouchables:?" Only three possible answers can be given, namely that they were Aryan, Pre Dravidian, or Dravidian (groups of people speaking different languages and following different cultures). Scholars disagree only with any of the three races (meaning three distinct cultural groups rather than ethnic units), but they are all agreed on one point namely that they are the most ancient people of India.

Aryan Origin

The theory that they were a section of the Aryans is based on two assumptions namely that the Sudras of the Four-Varna system were Aryans and that the untouchables were a part of the Sūdra- Varna and

therefore they were also *Āryans*. This probability is hinted at by Prof. R. S. Sharma' who chooses to call the untouchables as inferior *Sūdras*', who were the earliest Aryans, suppressed into slavery by a later wave of Aryan invaders. He does not of course maintain that the *Sūdras* were pure Aryans. They consisted of 'the defeated and dispossessed section of the Aryans and non- *Āryan* tribes'⁴. This statement naturally implies the idea that the untouchables also consisted of Aryan and non- Aryan tribes. Therefore , it follows that the untouchables were not pure Aryans and that a number of them belonged to the conquered and enslaved Indigenous tribes. It is probable that at first, only the conquered Indigenous tribes were segregated as untouchables and their ranks swelled later on by those *Āryans* who were excommunicated by the rank and file owing to certain crimes and transgression of caste rules.

Dravidian Origin

Dr. Ambedkar considers the untouchables as belonging to the Dravidian or *Nāga*tribes who by constant warfare among themselves were reduced to the status of 'broken -men' and therefore were forced to live outside the settled villages The only difference between them and the settled villagers was that they belonged to a different tribe. They were living outside the village from the beginning but it had nothing to do with untouchability⁵." According to him the *Dāsas* were the same as *Nāgas* and the *Nāgas* were the same as Dravidians. There have been at the most two races in the field, namely the Aryans and the Vagas. The Nagas or Dravidians were a very ancient people having a distinct culture of their own. They were a seafaring tribe who rose to prominence in South India and became merged with the *Cêras*. Their language, Tamil was the language of the whole of India, spoken from Kashmir to Kaniyakumari." While the Nagas of the North became Aryanised and gave up speaking their language, those of the South continued to speak that language and so they are called as Dravidians. (The word Tamil is said to have been derived from the word Dravidan) *Nāga* was a racial or cultural name and Dravida was their linguistic name⁶.

The above view of Dr. Ambedkar appears to be largely conjectural rather than historical . It is based on two assumptions namely that India was peopled by only one race before the advent of the Aryans and that was the Naga or Dravidian race and that it was a civilized race of which the uncivilized 'broken men' or nomadic people became the untouchables. Fr. Heras is also of opinion that the Dravidian civilization was the background of the *Āryan* civilization and such a civilization must have had the rudiments of caste system and even segregation which were simply copied by the *Āryans* later on. Prof Sundaram Pillai, a great Tamil savant of modern times, is of the view that the Dravidians or Tamil's were once spread over the whole of the Indian subcontinent and the *Āryan* civilization was literally the Dravidian civilization at bottom'. Bishop Caldwell also comes to the same conclusion on the basis of the existence of a large number of Dravidian words in Sanskrit. But modern scholars discount such a view. Mr. Hutton holds that the Austro-Asiatic group to which Munda and other languages belong was widely spread in the world from the Punjab to New Zealand, from Madagascar to Easter Island, and the early Sanskrit was influenced more by such Munda Mon Khmer languages rather than by Dravidian languages⁷.

Prof. Furer Haimendorf expresses the same view and declares that the "Dravidians at no time spread over a wider area than we find I n historical times". " He refutes the suggestion of Prof. Burrow of Oxford, that the Vedic speech was influenced by the proto-Dravidian languages which preceded the Dravidian and Aryan advent into India.⁸ It is indeed common knowledge that Sanskrit and other north Indian languages are completely different in Grammar, orthography, prosody, syntax and style from the Dravidian languages. As it will be seen in Chapter No. V the culture of the Tamilians as revealed from their earlier literary works was somewhat distinct from the Aryan culture. From the scanty information available it is difficult to establish that the Dravidians were spread over the whole of North India before the advent of the *Āryans*. Therefore, it is more probable to hold that the Dravidians were a separate stock different from the *Āryans* of the North and that they came into South India by sea route rather than through land route across the Vindhya mountains.

According to Dr. Speech, the Dravidians came to India from the Mediterranean countries through the sea, and according to Prof Nilakanta Sastri, the story of the *Āryan* invasion of North India and the Dravidian

being pushed south by them is a mere myth. Therefore, from time immemorial South India appears to have been developing a culture and language parallel to those of north Indian Āryan culture which is revealed from the Vēdic literature. Later on they mutually influenced each other and produced a synthetic culture. But in the early stages, the *Dasas* of Northern India, conquered by the Aryans do not seem to be the same as the Dravidians of the South. According to Ghosh they were probably the *Dāhas* or the Magian Intelligentsia who got dislodged and displaced from their homes and from their ruling position by another wave of northern Aryan invaders who might have been the ancestors of the Vedic Aryans themselves”.
18 But this theory falls to the ground, since Iranians did not settle in Iran until well after the Āryans settled in India. Therefore, the assumption of Dr. Ambedkar that the *Dāsas* were the same as the *Dāhas*, and the *Dāhas* were the same as *Nāgas* However, or Dravidians also seems to be not very well founded. Many of the *Dāsas* were allowed to enter into the *Sūdra* Varna and many others who refused to join the ranks of Vēdic Aryans were called as *Vrāyās* and were admitted into the Āryan society later on by a special ceremony called *Vrātyāstoma*, 19 if the *Vrātyās* so desired it. In’ course of time, even this ceremony seems to have been discontinued and the *Dāsas* and other indigenous tribes seem to have been segregated as untouchables. But the untouchables of North India and South India appear to have stemmed from different roots altogether. To consider all the untouchables of India, as the descendants of Dravidians, is rather untenable⁹.

Pre-Dravidian Origin

Many scholars suggest the probability of the untouchables being the aboriginal Pre-Dravidian people of India who were conquered by the incoming Aryans or Dravidians and then reduced to a low status. Mr. Stanley Rice contends that the untouchables of South India “were not the races conquered by the Aryans; the Paraiyans belonged to the aborigines who were conquered by the Dravidians and being of a different race they were not admitted into the totem of similar clans with which marriage is always intimately connected ... Thus the Dravidians applied to the Paraiyans the same test which the Aryans assumed to have applied to the conquered inhabitants. They reduced them to the position of serfs and assigned to them duties which it was thought beneath their own dignity to perform¹⁰”.

Bishop Caldwell also is inclined to think on similar lines. “Nevertheless”, he remarks, “the supposition that they belong to a different race, that they descended from the true aborigines of the country – a race older than the Dravidians themselves – and that they were reduced by the first Dravidians to servitude is not destitute of probability.” In support of his view he mentions the tradition which says that the Canerese Paraiyas were once an Independent people. He also says that Tamil Paraiyas were formerly a distinguished caste in the country and speaks of the special privileges that are offered to the Paraiyas at religious festivals. The strongest argument for their Pre-Dravidian origin. According to him is/that the national name of Tami lians, Malayalis, Kannadigas, etc., is withheld from them by the *usus loquendi* (sic) of the Dravidian languages and conferred exclusively on higher castes. *Tamilan* means neither a *Brāhmana* nor a *Paraiya* but a Dravidian a *Sūdra*. As the lower castes are never denoted by this national name it would seem to be implied that they do not belong to the nation but belong to a different race like Tamil speaking *Brāhmanas* and *Muhammadans*¹¹. Mr. Ghurye also feels that the Pre-Dravidians probably occupied South India before the advent of the Dravidians, Pressed on by waves of immigrants they ran into the jungles of South India. Those who chose to remain in the plains were enslaved and were assigned menial services. Just as the Āryans of North India suppressed the pre- Āryans into untouchable serfs so also the Dravidians of South India suppressed the pre-Dravidians and segregated them as untouchables. When the Aryans came in larger numbers in wave after wave into Northern India they gradually conquered the indigenous population¹².

“In the process of social inter-action between conquerors and the conquered, a portion of the indigenous conquered population was incorporated into the Aryan fold, The most backward and depressed they were called, the *Sudras*. The most backward and depressed section of the incorporated population. It appears, constituted the hereditary caste of untouchables, Prof. Oppert contended that ,The *Bharatas* mentioned in

the Rig Vēda were of non-Aryan origin who gradually gained access to the Āryan society and were divided but then into two great branches namely the *Kurusand Pañcalas*.

All the Bharatas could not be accommodated into the Aryan Society. The non-Āryanised Bharatas became a separate group and divided themselves into Gaudians and Dravidians. Many of the untouchables of Northern India belong to the Gaudian section of the Bharatas, while many of the South Indian untouchables belong to the Dravidian stock.” The Candaḷas are among the Gaudians, what the Paraiyas are among the Dravidians. This connection is also indicated by the name of Caṇḍalas which resembles those of Kaṇḍālas, Kands and Conda. “. He is of opinion that all the tribes whose names contain the letter ‘r’ such as *Nhar, Nar, Mahar* are the representatives of the first and oldest stratum of the Dravidian race and that the descendants of the Malla or Palla are those of the second stage, from which the other groups of the present Dravidian population has been gradually evolved Mr. Dutt on the other hand feels that the *Paraivas* belonged to a Pre-Dravidian stock, probably Muṇḍa Monkhmer race who had remained un-absorbed by the Dravidians and had been treated as *Paraiyans* even by the latter. Ghurye declares “the very wide though discontinuous distribution of *Candāla* and *Dom*, two groups which undoubtedly appear to have been ethnic in origin creates a presumption in favour of the theory that some of the untouchable groups must have originated in the conquest of the natives by the incoming Aryans¹³”.

Conclusion

Thus it may be concluded that the untouchables in Tamil Nadu are also Dravidian people and that they were probably its earliest inhabitants. The name Adi- Drāvida (original and earliest Drāvida) is quite an appropriate term to describe them. They are neither pure Aryans nor pure pre-Dravidians, even though their intermixture with all of them at a later date is quite probable. They speak Tamil and follow the same customs and manners of the of the other Tamilians. They are a little blacker than the others owing to their skin to the hot sun and intermixture with the aboriginal Negrit Tribes¹⁴. Well placed Adi-Drāvidās who work under the shade, are hardly distinguishable from the other Dravidas, in physical feature and colour. The only difference between the two types is that the other Tamilians are more Brahmanized than the latter. The Adi- Dravidas have their own mother goddesses like Mariamman, Gangamman, Pidari, Kangimar, and Mataṅgi and their own priests Like Valluvar. A number of non- Brahmanas also have resorted to the worship of such goddesses. Otherwise the differences are more economic rather than racial or religious. Once the social nausea is removed from the minds of the high caste Tamilians the gulf that divides the touchable and the untouchable in Tamil Nadu can easily be bridged. A discussion of the origin of some of the major untouchable castes in Tamil Nadu in the following pages will illustrate the validity of the general thesis propounded here.

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