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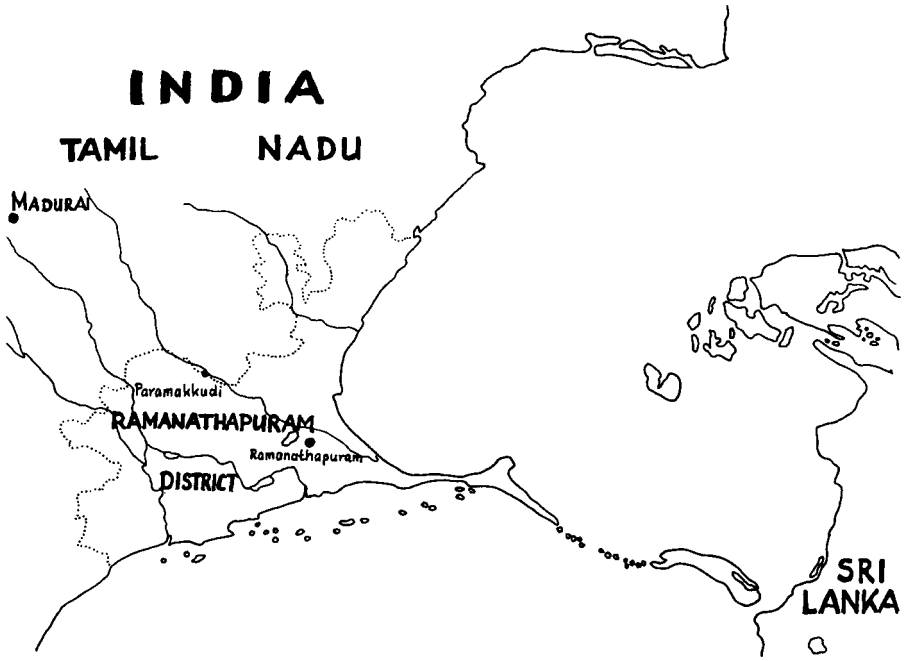
Untouchability and Inter-Caste Relations in Rural India: The Case of Southern Tamil Villages

By

A. Ramaiah

Introduction

Justice and equality are the two subjects often talked about by most of the nationalists and leaders of various political and ideological streams across the world including India. India was at the forefront in condemning racial discrimination particularly apartheid and also the influence of super powers) on the internal affairs of independent nations. Her commitment to secure its citizens' freedom, justice, equality and fraternity is reflected in the very preamble of the Indian Constitution. Towards achieving these challenging goals, special provisions have also been made in the Constitution to protect and promote the interests of the most oppressed section of Indian society - traditionally known as Untouchables and Constitutionally as the Scheduled Castes. These provisions are expected to alter the given unjust distribution of power (political and economic) and status (social) among different sections of people and thereby transform India into an egalitarian society. Given India's unequivocal commitment to secure its citizens these noble ideals - particularly the most exploited and pilloried section of India -, we shall attempt here to understand Indian villages, which host over 80 per cent of the Indian population, from the point of view of whether or not these villages patronise the institution of caste which is in contravention of these ideals or whether there are these little republics ideal for realising the said goals and thus to be preserved as they are as claimed by many social reformers including Mahatma Gandhi. In the process, we shall also address the question of how caste has remained unchanged, how it controls social interaction between higher and lower caste groups and accordingly perpetuates unequal control over power and status. And most importantly we shall also understand whether all the Scheduled Castes (lower castes) treat their members as equals or there is hierarchy, discrimination and practice of untouchability even among them.



Methodology

For better understanding on the issue of caste and its repercussions, we shall look into a few Indian villages in States like Tamil Nadu - one of the southern States of India known for protest against caste system and supremacy of the Brahmins (highest caste). The present paper is based on the qualitative and quantitative data collected from two villages: *Akramesi* and *Keelaparthibanur* located in Paramakudi taluk, Ramanathapuram district of southern Tamil Nadu. If the taluk town Paramakudi is considered the central reference point, Akramesi village falls on the north-east side with a distance of 21 km and Keelaparthibanur on the north-west side with the distance of 16.9 km. Akramesi village is predominantly inhabited by the middle or dominant castes (caste Hindus) and the Scheduled Castes over there were not only numerically in minority but also dependent on the former both for their livelihood and physical security. This village is surrounded by many villages with caste Hindus' dominance. In contrast, the Keelaparthibanur village is predominantly inhabited by the Scheduled Castes particularly the Pallar Caste - the high caste among the Scheduled Castes - and they are also economically independent. The caste Hindus here are relatively less in number. This village is surrounded by villages with similar characteristics. The choice on these two villages is to understand whether or not higher numerical strength and better economic status of the scheduled castes protect their self-respect and dignity and also protect them from atrocities. The details presented in this paper are based on the data collected and observations made by the researcher during November 1989 to April 1998. The respondents were the randomly chosen 50 members belonging to Pallar castes and a few purposively selected leaders of Pallar and high caste from the two villages.

Caste in Tamil Nadu

Though Tamil Nadu has 21 districts (1991 census), we may focus only on one district where inter-caste violence has been a common phenomenon. Ramanathapuram district one of the southern districts of Tamil Nadu - is one of such kind. Castes found in Tamil Nadu in general and Ramanathapuram district in particular may broadly be grouped into three categories: Brahmins, non-Brahmins and the Scheduled Castes. While the Brahmins are considered the highest in the caste hierarchy, the non-Brahmin castes are considered the middle level castes. The more visible middle

level castes include the land owning castes such as Vellalar, Ahamudayar *(Servai),* Maravar *(Thevar),* Kallar, Konar (Yadavar) and the Telegu speaking Naidus; trading castes such as Chettiyar, artisan castes like Kusavar or Kuyavan (Potter), Kotthan (mason), Thachan (carpenter), Kollan (blacksmith), Thattans or Nahai Aasari (goldsmith); and the servicing castes such as Ambattan (barbers) and Vannan (washermen). The more visible castes among the Scheduled Castes in Ramanathapuram district are the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars.

While most of the Brahmins strictly observe vegetarianism, most of the middle level castes except the Vellalar and to some extent the Chettiyar do not adhere to such restrictions. It may be noted that adhering to vegetarianism is one of the ways by which one asserts his/her superior position in the caste order. Among the meat eating Hindus, the beaf eaters are considered to be inferior to mutton eaters and even to pig eaters. Even today these middle level castes maintain, not fully in urban areas, complete distance from the Scheduled Castes. Of these middle level castes, a few such as Ahamudyar, Maravar and Kallar together known as *Mukkulathor* (three castes) are relatively more visible particularly in Ramanathapuram district as they are not only owners of cultivable land, large in number and more assertive but also known for committing atrocities on the Scheduled Castes.

The relationship between the higher castes and the lower ones has always been very hostile and in such relationship the losers are often those at the bottom of the caste ladder and the gainers are those above due to, as stated before, unjust and unequal distribution of power and status. Any attempt on the part of the lower ones to alter the given power positions is met with dire consequences. These include the murder of a Scheduled Caste leader Shri Thiyahi Imanual at Paramakkudi town and 42 Scheduled Caste persons at Mudukulathur in Ramanathapuram district in 1957, of 44 Scheduled Castes at Keelavenmani in Tanjaur district in 1968, 5 at Unjanai in Pasumpon Muthuramalingam district in 1979 and 16 at Vilupuram in Chengalpat district in 1983. Besides, there were a number of murders of the Scheduled Castes at Kudaloore and Vilupuram in Chengalpat district in 1987 and at Podi in Madurai district in 1988. In 1992 two more persons were killed at Paramakkudi in Ramanathapuram district.[1]

The higher lower caste and higher castes: Pallars

To understand the coercive nature of the caste system and the kind of caste discrimination faced by the lower castes, we shall focus on the Pallar caste. The Pallar caste is considered to be the highest caste among the lower or the Scheduled Castes and lower caste among the higher castes or the caste Hindus in Tamil Nadu. The Pallars (people belonging to the Pallar caste) constitute the largest among the 76 Scheduled Castes of Tamil Nadu. According to 1981 census, out of the total Schedule Caste population excluding the Adi *Dravida - a* category consisting of number of Schedule Castes - the *Pallars* constituted the maximum with 27.60 per cent followed by the *Paryar* with 22.96 per cent, the *Chakkiliyar* with 14.29 per cent and the *Artinthathiyar* with 11.81 per cent. A majority of Pallars (33.4%) reside in Thanjavur district followed by Madurai (21.2%) and Ramanathapuram (about 3%) districts. *Puthira vannan* Caste is considered to be the most polluting caste among the Scheduled Castes as for generations they have been washing clothes of other Scheduled Castes.

Genesis of Pallars

The Pallar caste is said to be the ancient community of Tamil Nadu. The people of this caste are considered to be the great cultivators especially of wet land of Tamil country. The term *Pallar* seems to have been derived from the word *Pallam,* meaning a pit or low-lying region. Since wet land is usually found in low lying area and the Pallars were often engaged in cultivation of such land, they came to be known as Pallam and latter as *Pallan* and *Pallar.* It is argued with sufficient support of literature that the Pallars of todaY were actuallY known as *Mallar* belonging to the Dra-

1 See Ramaiah, A. *Protest Movement and Scheduled Caste Identity: The Impact of Constitutional Provisions on Scheduled Castes in Selected Villages of Tamil Nadu,* Ph.D. Thesis, CSSS/SSS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 1998, 92.

vidian race about 2300 years back and were the rulers of Tamil country during the 14th-15th centuries. It is also asserted that they are the descendants of *Pallavas* who were ruling the Andhra and Tamil countries once. Since they were known for charity, heading and presiding village panchayat meetings and being kind, they were referred to as *Velalar;* and for their ability to control flood, they were *kudumban.* Putting all these qualities together, the Mallar (Pallar) call themselves *Devendra Kula velalar.* There are over 84 branches among Pallars. The Mallar were called Pallar only after 15th century by more powerful tribes from other parts of South India with a view to degrading their social status.[2]

Caste relation among Pallars and those above

Perhaps due to their glorious past and their origin as rulers, the Pallars have been militant in opposing discrimination of every kind. Though the Brahmins and a few upper level middle castes such as the Vellalars and Chettiyars treat the Pallars as Untouchables, the latter do not consider them as their opponents or direct enemies.

For them the real opponents are a few middle level dominant castes such as the Ahamudayar, Maravar and Kallar who indulge in open violence against them. This is evident from the fact that throughout Tamil Nadu most of the incidence of violence against Pallars have been perpetrated by these castes only. Talking to a Pallar man of Nedumbuli village near Paramakkudi town in the State of Tamil Nadu, it was found that the caste Hindus like the Maravar did not allow the Scheduled Caste women including the Pallar women to wear blouses but only sari to cover heir breasts. By this covert meanness the caste Hindus compelled the Scheduled Caste women to expose their breast to their lust. As this practice was in use for a long time, the Scheduled Caste women did not even develop the habit of wearing blouses. This continued till early 1950s particularly in villages like Nilayambudi village near Paramakudi. Even at the time of this study we found many elderly women not wearing blouses and covering themselves only with sari.

Untouchability in villages

We shall now focus on the magnitude of caste discrimination and untouchability as experienced by the Scheduled Castes in general and the Pallar caste people in particular residing in the two villages: Akramesi and Keelaparthibanur. As stated earlier, *Akramesi* is one of the villages where the middle level castes (caste Hindus) were large in number and their domination over the Scheduled Castes in general and Pallar in particular was very much prevalent even during this study (November 89 to April 98). Out of 696 households in this village, the Scheduled Castes consisting of the Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars accounted only for 25 households and the rest belonged to the caste Hindus, of whom Marvar caste alone accounted for as many as 500 households. There is not even a single village around Akramesi in about 15 km radius with high concentration of Pallars or other Scheduled Castes.

It is surprising to note that many of the observations made as early as 1952 regarding the nature and magnitude of untouchability practised in villages[3] were found to be true even at the time of present study. Both economic and political powers were intact in the hands of Maravars and Ahamudayars - the two middle level dominant castes. All the Scheduled Castes including Pallars did not have land of their own and depended on the former both for their livelihood and physical security. Education for the Scheduled Caste children was generally discouraged. At the time of this study, only one Pallar had studied up to standard XI. Despite having a driving-licence, he had to remain jobless. Whenever he applied for a job or for a loan from the government, the caste Hindus with their easy access to all the officials right from the village panchayat to panchayat union, Tahsildar office and

2 Guruswamy, S., *Tamil llakkiathil Pallar (Mallar) Devendra Kula Velalar,* Mandram, Coimbatore (Tamil) 1993, 392; also see Ramaiah (note 1), 1998, 70-73.

3 Gough, Kathleen E., "The Social Structure of Tanjore Village", in: M.N. Srinivas (ed.), *Indian villages,* Asia, Bombay 1969, 90.

post office did every thing possible to disqualify him for the job and retained him in the village itself.

None of the Scheduled Castes were allowed even to walk through the residential area or through the village's main street running through the residential areas of the dominant castes. They had to walk a long way along the periphery of the village to reach their huts. They were not allowed to enter any of the village temples visited by the caste Hindus and had no right to perform any rituals even outside the premises of such temples. The Pallars had a separate temple (but open to all castes) called *Maravar Mahan*, meaning son of Maravar (the dominant caste). The name of this temple itself indicates that the caste Hindus were equal to a god and the Scheduled Castes had to respect and worship them. The Pallars had to address the caste Hindus only as *sami* (God), whereas even a ten year old caste Hindu boy addressed the Pallar man of 80 year old by his name or even by his caste in a derogatory manner because of his superior caste status. This is also true in the case of using the community well meant for all castes. The Pallars were prohibited from fetching water from this well on the pretext that their vessels and buckets would pollute the water by their touch. The pond used by the caste Hindus for bathing was not even to be approached by the Scheduled Castes. Each Scheduled Caste had its own burial ground located far away from that of the caste Hindus and they were not allowed to take funeral processions through the main street of the village.

At tea stalls owned by the caste Hindus, the Pallars were provided with tea or water in separate glasses locally known as vattai. Any Scheduled Caste person intending to have tea at such tea stalls was expected to pick-up the vattai kept separately for them at one corner of the stall and show it to the person preparing tea, who would then pour it into the vattai from a distance. They were also expected to wash the vattai on their own and leave it where it was picked up from. While the Pallars were to sit on the ground - many a times out side the stall - the caste Hindus were served tea on benches inside the tea stall. The Pallars were also prohibited from riding bicycle. They were expected to place their towel in their armpit while addressing the caste Hindus and not on their shoulder, the usual practice. The *dhoti* (white cloth with a thin coloured border) they wore was supposed to cover their legs only up to the knee and not their legs completely as it would cause an insult to their high caste Hindus. These restrictions were applicable not only to the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes of this village but also to all the Scheduled Castes visiting this village.

Besides, the Pallars were expected to do all manual works outside the premises of the caste Hindus' houses both during auspicious and inauspicious occasions. In return they used to get either a meagre amount of wage or a meal. They were generally expected to carry the food to their home or they had to eat at the backyard of the house only when the entire function was over. Sometimes, they were given nothing for their services. Those trying to question the caste Hindus and disobey their demands were met with dire consequences. The common punishment for such disobedience was nothing less than tying the person to a street lamp post or a tree situated within the village premise and beating him in public till he collapsed. One of the respondents (a youth of 14 years old) told that a few years ago his elder sister was raped in a broad daylight at his but in front of many fellow Scheduled Castes for informing the Collector of Ramanathapuram district about the practice of the caste discrimination in his village. Despite the fact that this youth was one of the active communist party members in the village and has also sought the help of a local communist party leader, he did not get any help from the comrade since the leader was a caste Hindu and his loyalty was more towards his fellow caste men than towards the proletariat which is what emphasised in the party ideology. The police station situated in a small town about 5 km away from this village was of no use for the Scheduled Castes as none in the police station paid any heed to the heinous crimes committed against them. The Pallars from nearby villages, being numerically in the minority and living in a similar situation, never dared to come to their rescue.

When the researcher interviewed the Akramesi's Village Kanakku Pillai (Village Administrative Officer or the person in charge of maintaining all village records) and enquired about the practice of untouchability in the village, he was told to his surprise that the Scheduled Castes did not have any such problems, and there had been a very cordial relationship between them and the caste Hindus. He was also told by the Village Administrative Officer not to go to the village personally for such

information as he could provide every information about the village and the condition of Scheduled Castes over there. When the researcher insisted that there were problems between the Scheduled Castes and caste Hindus and hence he would like to visit the village personally to take stock of the situation, the Village Administrative Officer sarcastically said, "*you go there, you will get, 'everything' from the caste Hindus"*. What he meant was that the researcher would be beaten up by the caste Hindus if he insisted on knowing the practice of untouchability over there. On the whole, the Scheduled Castes including Pallars in this village had to lead a very inhuman life. There seemed no commitment and genuine efforts on the part of the government officials to ensure the physical security and enhance the economic status of the Scheduled Castes therein. While this was the condition of the Pallars in general, the condition of the Parayars and Chakkiliyars was still worse. The Pallars treated the Parayars as untouchables and so were the Parayars towards the Chakkiliyars. Social interaction among these castes was very limited. Inter-dinning and inter-caste marriages between them were also prohibited. What is important at this juncture is to find out why the magnitude of caste discrimination faced by the Pallars has been very high in this village. Based on certain observations and information collected from the respondents and village leaders, the major reasons for the same are: a) not only within Akramesi village, are the non-Brahmin dominant middle castes numerically dominant but the village is also surrounded by these caste people and the Scheduled Castes are very few in number and also economically dependent on these dominant castes; b) the Pallars of Akramesi village are economically dependent on the dominant castes in and around the village; c) the police station located at about 2 km away from this village is of no use to the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes as it is dominated by the non-Scheduled Castes who are often against their interest. And they get no support from their fellow caste people from nearby villages; and d) none has completed even school education in this village and most of them have remained ignorant of their rights and privileges.

In contrast, in Keelaparthibanur village the Scheduled Caste population particularly of Pallar caste is large in number and they stand much ahead in every respect. The caste Hindus here could not discriminate the Pallars in any form. Unlike Akramesi village, *Keelaparthibanur* is divided into two hamlets. The Pallars reside on the southern side in one hamlet locally known as *Keelavadakur,* and the caste Hindus in another hamlet known as *Melavadakur* located a furlong away on the northern side. At the time of this study, the Pallars were more in numbers with 130 houses against only 92 houses of the caste Hindus. Most of the Pallars were land owners and some worked as share croppers on the land of Vellalars in the same village and also in the Parthibanur town located just two km away. Some of them worked merely as agricultural labourers. Though there was no Brahmin in this village, the Pallars often happened to go near the Brahmins when they visited other villages and the nearby town. It was found that prior to Independence, the Pallars were never allowed to enter the residential areas of the caste Hindus particularly of the Brahmins. Whenever a Brahmin came out of his house, no Scheduled Caste person was expected to come in his vicinity as it would pollute his sanctity and if it happened by mistake, he would go back home cursing the latter. He would come out once again only after taking a bath and making sure that no such thing would be repeated. However, as a mark of protest a few Pallars of this village deliberately used to appear before the Brahmin again and again. By doing so the Pallars forced the Brahmin to get back home once again to take a bath drawing water from deep well. From 1960 onwards, most of the Brahmins left the villages selling off their land and other properties and settled in nearby towns. They did so not only because their services in villages were no more considered essential but also because of the necessity that stemmed from their educational achievement and employment prospects in towns.

Though the Pallars interacted with and had access to the residential areas of the Vellalars who are next to the Brahmins in the caste hierarchy, the former were denied entry into the houses of the latter. They had to wait at the *thinnai* (corridor) of the Vellalar houses. The Vellalars did not accept even water from the Pallars. However, the Pallars did not protest much against these kind of discriminatory practices on the pretext that the Vellalars had extended financial help to them whenever needed. Yet, their younger generation did protest against Vellalars by requesting their parents not to have any relation with them and cultivate their lands any longer. Though there was no *Chettiyar*

caste (goldsmith) in this village, even in the 1950s the Pallars interacted closely with these people living in the nearby towns like Parthibanur, Paramakkudi and Manamadurai in the process of buying and mortgaging gold ornaments. The Chettiyars did not overtly prevent the Pallars from entering their shops as they were looking for customers to enrich their business and, hence, entertained both the caste Hindus and the Scheduled Castes. Since their shops were located only in town, there was no opportunity and also no need for the Pallars to visit their residential areas. The *Thachchans* (carpenters) from other villages had no problem in extending their services to the Pallars of this village to earn their livelihood. But they would not accept water from their houses. They preferred water fetched directly from the well in a vaali (a metal bucket). Many a times they brought their food with them but sometimes they cooked food then and there, accepting uncooked rice and fresh vegetables from the Pallars.

About 25 years ago, the Pallars had faced yet another problem. Till late 1960s the services of the Ambattan (barber) and Vannan (washermen) - considered to be above the Pallars in the caste hierarchy - were not available to them both within the village and in the nearby towns. The two castes extended their services only to the caste Hindus. Pallars, therefore, had to depend on the Chakkiliyars for hair cutting and the Puthiravannans or Puthiravannars for washing their cloths. The Ambattans and Vannans refused to entertain the Pallars and other Scheduled Castes in their work place (service centres/shops) with a fear of loosing customers from the caste Hindus and their higher status in the caste hierarchy. However, the situation started changing since early 1960 onwards when the Pallars started asserting their rights and protesting against such practices. The Ambattans and Vannars could not resist this pressure from the Pallar youth who had been to colleges and also worked as government officials, a few of them as engineers and doctors. The caste Hindus also could not do much in this regard. These services were then extended to all castes. Presently, the Pallars do not consider in any way the Ambattans and Vannans as their superior, and for all practical reasons they do not interact much with one another except in the hair-cutting and laundry shops.

The Pallars of Keelaparthibanur village consider the Maravars and Ahamudayars their real opponents as stated earlier. They think that they are in no way inferior to the latter. The Pallars in this village are more advanced in terms of their educational and economic status. They also do not depend on these castes for their livelihood. They fierce fully resist and retaliate whenever the caste Hindus demonstrate their caste superiority in any manner. About 15 years ago, Maravars discriminated the Pallars in every possible way and the latter had to adhere to all such unjust practices. However, over a period of time they began to protest in overt and covert forms. Most of such incidents culminated in the form of a major caste violence between the two castes although none of them could claim a total victory over the other. Further, prior to 1975 the Pallars did not have access to take a bath in the common pond located at the Melavadakur. But they fought against the caste Hindus and took up the matter with the police. Despite stiff protest by the caste Hindus, the Pallars succeeded in getting access to the pond. Moreover, in the late 1970s Mr. K. Ukkirapandyan - one of the Pallars from this village - got elected to the State Legislature from the Paramakkudi reserved Constituency. In the late 1980s, the President for the Keelaparthibanur panchayat union was Mr. S. Malaichamy, a Pallar from this village. Besides, this village also had one Mr. A.K. Katupaiah whom most of the Pallars of this and nearby villages turned to for help whenever there was caste conflicts and threat from the caste Hindus. Karupaiah could take up caste issues boldly since he enjoyed the support of a few leaders of the Congress (I) Party. The caste Hindus then had no courage to discriminate against them overtly. Whenever they attempted to do so, they were not spared. However, both the caste groups soon reconciled their enmities towards each other and began to interact cordially. Although within the village the Pallars supported various political parties, they got united whenever the status and power of their caste was threatened by the caste Hindus. For all practical reasons, both the Pallars and the caste Hindus tried to maintain a cordial relationship towards each other. A few caste Hindu leaders did eat with the Pallars during the weddings of latter to demonstrate their `unbiased' attitude towards them and to ensure their votes but, in general, inter-dinning and inter-caste marriages between them are never tolerated.

It may be noted that though the Pallars were primarily engaged in agriculture, in a few villages like Kalaiyur, located on the southern side of Paramakudi town at a distance of 9.4 km, one or two very elderly and economically poor Pallars had been doing together the job of digging burial ground for decades. When asked „why" they said, „we do this work for the caste Hindus not out of fear or caste inferiority but as we do not want to displease them. After all, they have helped us financially at times of crisis". Moreover, doing such a job ensures them a handsome amount of Rs. 20/- to Rs.35/-. Elsewhere, the Pallars do not consider such work demeaning and perform without any inhibition.[4]

The above narration of the nature and magnitude of caste discrimination experienced by Pallars in both types of villages has brought to light a few important points. Though in most of the villages the Scheduled Castes are spread in small numbers, there are villages exclusively made up of Pallars. Most of the Pallars own land but their socio-economic status is not the same in all villages. While there are villages like Akramesi where most of the Pallars are illiterates and do not own even one half acre of land and depend totally on the caste Hindus for everything, there are villages like Keelaparthibanur where most of the Pallars own land (a few of them own more than 10 acres of wet land), comparatively more of them are literate and have also achieved political power. And caste Hindus can never look down upon them. But in villages of the former type, they are humiliated in all possible ways and yet they can never raise finger against the caste Hindus. It may, therefore, be hypothesised that in villages where Pallars are in the majority, most of them are also educationally advanced, economically independent to a great extent, politically conscious, well mobilised and powerful enough to fight against the caste Hindus perpetrating atrocities on them. The situation is just the opposite in villages where they are in the minority. To test this hypothesis, we need to look into a greater number of such villages which is not the purpose of this paper.

Untouchability among Scheduled Castes

Another aspect of this paper is to bring to light whether or not there is hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes and if so the nature of caste discrimination and Untouchability suffered by those at the lower levels of caste order. As stated earlier in Ramanathapuram district, the more visible castes among the Scheduled Castes are Pallars, Parayars and Chakkiliyars. Evidence discerned from the thirteenth century Tamil inscriptions indicate that the Parayas or Parayars were closer to the bottom in the caste hierarchy and were engaged in diverse fields of activities. The term *parayan* is derived from the Tamil word *parai* (drum) as certain Parayars act as drummers at fitnerals and village festivals.[5] They are also engaged in cultivation, grass cutting and weaving. The fifteenth century literatures indicate that the Parayars were also engaged in tanning and skinning leather which in the view of classical or Brahmanical Hinduism is considered to be defiling and polluting.[6] During the eighteenth century they also worked as tank-diggers, construction workers, servants, transport workers and a few as soldiers in armies. This period has been described as the ‚golden age for Paraiahs'.[7] The Parayars worship the common *Grama Devta* (village deity) such as Ellamma, Mungilamma, Padaiyattal or Pidariyamma.[8]

Although in the southern part of Tamil Nadu the Parayars are considered below the Pallars in the caste hierarchy, in the northern part particularly in Thanjavur district the Parayars do not acknowledge the latter's supremacy over them. Whatever be the history of the Parayars, in Ramanathapuram district most of them are, in the present days, merely landless labourers. Compared to the Pallars, they are still fewer in number in most of the villages of this district. For earning their livelihood,

4 Deliege, Robert, "At the threshold of Untouchability: Pallars and Valaiyars in a Tamil Village", in: C.J. Fuller (ed.), *Caste Today*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1997, 77.

5 Government of Tamil Nadu, *Gazetteer of India: Tamil Nadu State – Ramanathapuram District*, Madras 1972, 154.

6 Karashima, "The Untouchables in Tamil Inscriptions and Other Historical Sources in Tamil Nadu", in: H. Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, Manohar, New Delhi 1997, 23-4

7 See Washbrook, "Land and labour in the late eighteenth century South India: The Golden Age *of* Pareah", in: Peter Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1993, 78-80.

8 Government *of* Tamil Nadu (note 5), 154.

they continue to do their job of playing drums on both auspicious and inauspicious occasions of the caste Hindus and Pallars as well. They also earn their livelihood by making and selling certain palm leaf household items. Though in the past they seemed to have engaged in diverse fields of activities which had no social stigma, their association with leather works and drum beating, and their habit of eating beef seemed to have had a greater impact in pushing them down the ladder of caste.

The Pallars in most of the villages of this district consider themselves to be above the Parayars in their social status and also treat them as Untouchables. They allege that the Parayars side with the caste Hindus during caste clashes and, hence, even label them as betrayers. They use the Parayars as symbol of abuses although the only major difference between them and the Parayars is that the former refrain from eating beef while the latter relish it.

Falling next to the Parayars in the caste hierarchy are the *Chakkiliyars.* They form an appreciable number in the district. Though no literature seems to be available to indicate their historical origin, it is maintained that they might be immigrants from the Telugu or Kanarese districts. Their gods include Madurai Veeran, Mariamma, Muneeswara, Draupathi and Gangamma. By taking into account the kind of caste status they have been ascribed to and the life style they have been leading for the last several decades, it may be said that the Chakkiliyars are even below the Parayars in the caste hierarchy. It is believed that they originally held a high position in the caste hierarchy but were latter degraded.[9] Their traditional occupations are sweeping, scavenging and removing the dead animals, tanning and making foot wear. They also play drums and a wind instrument which looks similar to *shenoy - a* famous North Indian musical instrument and is usually played by higher caste people for auspicious occasions. In some villages, Pallars prefer the Chakkiliyars instead of the Parayars to play drums on the occasion of their *Kula Deivam* (clan God) festival although they do not allow the latter inside their temple. However, the Parayars' interaction with Pallars is very limited.

The Chakkiliyars sweep the streets of the Pallars and, in turn, get food from them. They take away the dead cows, bulls and other cattle of Pallars, remove their skin for making drums and consume their meat. They relish beef and pork. All these activities and habits are considered by the upper castes and the Pallars to be dirty, defiling and polluting. Hence, the Chakkiliyars are looked down upon. They have not challenged so far the caste supremacy of the Pallars over them in any way. In general, the inter-dinning and inter-caste marriages between them and the Pallars are prohibited although the intensity with which these restrictions are observed varies from place to place.

The *Kuravan* or *Kuravar* caste is found to be on par with or slightly above the Chakkiliyars in the caste hierarchy. Kuravars form the sixth largest Scheduled Caste population both in Tamil Nadu and in Ramanathapuram district. They make certain household items out of bamboos and palm leafs and sell them to earn their living. They hunt birds and rear country pigs (black pigs) both for their consumption and sale. They also hunt cats from the village side for consumption. Some of them work as fortune-tellers. Since they use the trained Kili (parrot) to predict the fortune of the people, they are also known as kili *josiyars.* However, they do not go to any other castes asking for food. They are also not required to perform any inauspicious tasks and rituals for other Scheduled Castes. The Pallars consider them as lower caste although they have no means to demonstrate their caste supremacy over them.

The people of *Puthiravannan* caste are traditionally the washer-man for the Pallars. They collect the Pallars' used clothes and get them washed; some time they also get the washed clothes ironed. For this service, they are entitled to collect food from the Pallar families. At the end of the year they are also given four to six *marakkaal* (a cylinder shaped metal container used for measuring the quantity of food grains) of paddy (each *marakkaal* would contain about four and a half kilograms of paddy). Besides, whenever a Pallar girl attains puberty, the women folk of Puthiravannan family take possession of the used clothes. They wash these clothes and use them. Similarly, the man who performs inauspicious rituals on the occasion of death of a Pallar is entitled to some money (usually ranging from Rs.2/- to Rs.15/-). Also, he takes away the new *dhoti* (the white cloth specially designed for man to wear below the waist) tied soon after giving bath to the dead body and covers it with another

9 Government of Tamil Nadu (note 5), 155.

new dhoti given to him by the close relative of the deceased person. If the deceased person happens to be a woman, bathing and changing of the dress is done by the Puthiravannan women. However, the rituals are usually performed by their men.

How Pallars Remain Superior to Other Scheduled Castes

Though like the Parayars, Chakkiliyars and other Scheduled Castes, the Pallars have also been segregated from the main village habitats, they enjoy a superior status among the Scheduled Castes. It is, therefore, important to understand the socio-cultural and economic reasons which keep them superior among the Scheduled Castes particularly in Ramanathapuram district. A number of studies[10] have indicated about the prevalence of caste discrimination among the Scheduled Castes themselves. However, these studies have not looked in detail at the reasons behind such discrimination.
The Pallars have a few traditions which make them different from and also superior to other Scheduled Castes. Compared to Parayars, they are more aggressive, socially and politically conscious, more militant and better organised. This difference is also mythologically expressed since the Parayars claim a Brahman ancestry, while the Pallars are closer to a fierce and warlike middle level castes like the Kallar caste and associate themselves with a more martial tradition.[11] In recent years, the militant Pallars claim their descent from the God *Indira.* Secondly, while the Parayars prefer to call themselves Harijans, the Pallars tend to refer to themselves by their caste name so that they are not amalgamated with other lower castes. Besides, the very name ‚Pallar` is not as shameful as other untouchable caste and it is not associated with any defiling occupations. Though the Parayars are involved in diverse fields of activities, they continue to be associated with certain occupations like drum beating. Similarly, the main traditional occupations of the Kuravars are such as rearing pigs, hunting cats and birds, and also fortune-telling. All these occupations are considered to be degrading, defiling, and polluting except agriculture and allied activities in which primarily the Pallars are engaged.[12] That is why, the Pallars have been defined as a class of agricultural labourers.[13] Accordingly, the Pallars are held high in the Scheduled Castes hierarchy but all other Scheduled Castes are looked down upon by them. Moreover, they have the history of being the rulers of Tamil country during 14th-15th centuries.
The Pallars maintain their caste superiority also by means of not eating beef which the other Scheduled Castes do. They do so for two reasons: first, like the caste Hindus they consider beef eating as taboo and sin, and feel that eating beef is below their social status. Second, since the main occupation of most of the Pallars is agriculture and allied activities, they depend completely on the cows and bullocks for ploughing their lands and for transporting their goods. As stated earlier, these animals are indeed part and parcel of their social and economic life and, therefore, they have a sentimental attachment and sympathetic attitude towards them and thus refrain from eating the meat of these animals. It may, however, be noted that some of the educated Pallars who are used to metropolitan life style have adopted the habit of beef eating and have also developed better and friendly relations with other Scheduled Castes. But they are discouraged from eating beef when they get back to their village. In general, the Pallars particularly in Paramakkudi taluk of Ramanathapuram district are also not fond of eating pork which the Parayars and other Scheduled Castes do. A few elderly ones eating pork are ridiculed in public by Pallars themselves calling them, *Kattak kaalu,* meaning *short leg* or *pig*. A few Pallars who reared pigs were indeed laughed at by others and as a result they had to give up pig rearing. The Pallars are considered to be superior to the Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannar also because of certain give-and-take relationships prevailing among them. For instance, those Chakkiliyars and the Puthiravannars staying at the village itself collect food from the

10 Gough, K., (1969), Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village,* University of California Press, Berkeley 1971; Moffatt, M., *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979.

11 Deliege, Robert (1997, note 4), 77; Mosse, D., *Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A study of social organisation and religion in rural Ramnad,* Unpublished D. Phil. Thesis, University of Oxford, Oxford 1985, 356.

12 Deliege, Robert (1997, note 4), 77.

13 Thurston, E., *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (7 volumes), Government Press, Madras 1909, 472.

Pallars once or twice on almost all days they work. The Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannars come over there on both auspicious and inauspicious occasions with bigger containers to collect the left-over food. Moreover, the Puthiravannans are entitled to collect every year about six *marakkal* of paddy from every Pallar's family. They also serve as messenger for the Pallars particularly for passing on to other villages the inauspicious information such as death. On such visits most of the times they are fed by the Pallars receiving the message and in some cases they also get a small quantity of food grains like paddy and raggi. The Pallars give them water or food not in their own glasses or plates but in path (a small size marakkal) and that too in the *thinnai* (corridor). They in principle discourage the Parayars, Chakkiliyars and Puthiravannar from wearing sandals within their villages. Unlike other Scheduled Castes, the Pallars depend neither on the caste Hindus or nor on the other Scheduled Castes for their living. After all, ritual status alone cannot keep a particular caste in a particular position in the caste hierarchy. A strong economic base is equally important.[14] It may however be noted that such discriminatory practices among the Schedules Castes are not common in all the villages. They are more in villages like Akramesi and less in villages like Keelaparthibanur.

The Changing Scenario

Though the above mentioned observations are applicable to the Pallars in general and the studied villages in particular, there has been a considerable decline in the last two decades in the rigidity with which these restrictions are observed and adhered to particularly in villages with high concentration of their population. For instance, in Keelaparthibanur village the Pallars have become relatively liberal in their interaction and social relations with the other Scheduled Castes. Now, the Parayars and Chakkiliyars - considered to be lower to the Pallar caste - do wear sandals while they are in the residential areas of the Pallars. With the initiatives of some of the liberal minded educated Pallar youth, the other Scheduled Castes do participate even in auspicious occasions of the Pallars such as wedding. Here, it is important to note that in the Parthibanur town no caste Hindu visited the saloon run by a Chakkiliyar as it was opened for the Pallars who had no access to the Ambattan's saloons which were meant only for the caste Hindus. With their newly achieved education and government employment, most of the Pallars preferred entry to the Ambattan's saloons causing closer of the Chakkiliyars' saloon. Usually, both Puthiravannars and Chakkiliyars are not allowed to eat along with the Pallars. They eat only when all the guests have had their meals. Though in both types of villages participation of the other Scheduled Castes in the Pallars' auspicious occasions is restricted, this has been relaxed in the recent years especially in villages like Keelaparthibanur. With the initiatives of the young educated Pallars, the other Scheduled Castes are now allowed to dine with the Pallars on all occasions. In a few Pallar houses they are also served food in the plates used often by the younger members of the family. Moreover, the educated young Pallar boys and girls from villages with high concentration of their caste invite their upper caste school and college mates to their home on important occasions. Knowing well that their parents would ask about the caste background of their friends, the host Pallar students generally conceal the caste background particularly of their lower caste friends. They do so fearing that their parents would insult their lower caste friends in some way or the other. In general, the young educated Pallars from such villages do not expect the other Scheduled Castes to adhere to the old customs and practices and remain subservient to them for ever. This of course is a rare practice and very often the elderly ones in the family express their unhappiness over it. But such interaction can never happen in villages with less concentration of Pallars. In fact, in such villages where the Pallars' expected demands are not met and restrictions are violated by the other Scheduled Castes, the former punish them with the support of the caste Hindus there.

Separate Villages

14 Beteille, Andre, "The Social Structure of an Indian Village", in: M.N. Srinivas (ed.), *India's Villages,* Asia, Bombay 1969, 6.

The experiences of Pallar caste people in the two villages - one having high and another having a lower concentration of the Scheduled Caste population - clearly endorses What Dr. BR. Ambedkar said once. He said that in India each village is a „place of contest between the Hindus who are economically and socially strong and the Untouchables who are economically poor and numerically small".[15] He further says that in this contest the Untouchables are always at bay specially for two reasons. Firstly, they and the caste Hindus are unequally matched as far as their numerical strength is concerned; they are scattered into a few families in each village all over India. Secondly, they are a disunited body infested with the caste system in which they believe as much as the caste Hindus. This has given rise to mutual rivalry and jealousy and made common action impossible.[16] And therefore he suggested: "It is the system of village plus the Ghetto which perpetuates untouchability and the untouchables therefore demand that the nexus should be broken and the untouchables who are as a matter of fact socially separate should be settled into separate villages exclusively of untouchables in which the distinction of the high and the low and of touchable and untouchable will find no place".[17]

This important suggestion of Dr. Ambedkar has deliberately been ignored by the responsible citizens of India so far. More often than not precisely for this reason atrocities on the Scheduled Castes are on the rise and the Indian villages continue to remain a domain of injustice, oppression and exploitation and have never been little republics as claimed in the past. At this juncture what Andre Beteille has said is worth noting: "... in India everyday social life is still governed substantially by the hierarchical attitude and sentiments carried over from the past. The awe for those who are superior by birth or social position (higher caste) and the contempt towards social inferiors (lower castes) are equally wide spread in the rural and urban areas and among the educated and the uneducated."[18]

Reflecting on his latest film *Samar* (conflict), a rich, multi-faceted exploration of caste system, the noted Indian film director Shyam Benegal endorses it by saying that India lives in so many centuries at the same time. He further says, „we don't even realise how deep-rooted our caste prejudice are. We respond to a person's caste, rather than his humanity".[19] This indeed reiterates the fact what Dr. Ambedkar once articulated: "No civilised society of today presents more survivals of primitive times than does the Indian society. Its religion (caste as well) is essentially primitive and its tribal code, in spite of the advance of time and civilization, operates in all its pristine vigour even today".[20]

Conclusion

Though India is legally bound to make justice, freedom, equality and fraternity a reality, the foregoing discussion clearly brings to light that in Indian villages the concept of freedom articulated by the Indian freedom fighters and that enshrined in the Indian Constitution seems meaningless for the Scheduled Castes. It is so viewed in the light of continuing practice of Untouchability and increasing number of atrocities on them in villages and the fact that they still remain the much exploited section of Indian society despite number of protective and development measures to safeguard their interests. What is happening in many Indian villages is in fact inhuman and unjust.

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15 Ambedkar, B.R., "States and Minorities: What are their rights and how to secure them in the Constitution of free India", in: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1,* Government of Maharashtra, Bombay 1979, 426.

16 Ambedkar, B.R., "Their Wishes are Laws unto Us", in: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches,* Vol. 5, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay 1989, 265-66.

17 Ambedkar, B. R. (1979, note 15), 425.

18 Beteille, Andre, "Trials of Democracy: Primacy of Customs over Law", *Times of India,* April 29th, 1999.

19 Benegal, Shyam, "Actors are not like brushes in the painter's hand: they talk back", *Times of India,* May 2nd 1999.

20 Ambedkar, B.R, "Annihilation of Caste", in: *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1,* Government of Maharashtra, Bombay 1979, 9.

The efforts of Government through the Reservation Policy and protective measures to educate, provide employment, empower the Scheduled Castes politically and provide an opportunity to voice their grievances in State Legislature and Parliament and also to protect them from all kinds of injustice and exploitation have not yielded the desired results. Why? It is primarily because the executives of these measures do not favour them as these would not only dilute the power and status of the upper caste but also raise scope for those deprived to enhance their power and status position. This in turn would ultimately challenge the supremacy of the upper caste. It is also due to the fact that the number of those controlling bureaucracy and those enjoying political power are greater among the higher caste Hindus compared to the Scheduled Caste people. This number has to be reversed at least for some decades if at all we want a balanced power positions between the oppressing and oppressed caste groups. But as long as the present village set-up continues - with the caste Hindus having a complete control over the Scheduled Castes -, this change can never happen.
What is most important of all is reconsidering the suggestion of Dr. Ambedkar that a socially distinct community should be allowed to settle in separate villages so that within such villages there is no scope for any one to label another as untouchable or lower caste. Only in such separate villages the so-called lower caste people can also experience freedom which India got five decades before. Besides, a fire spewing urge to fight for their rights, self-respect and dignity and a strive for coming together across their religious, regional, linguistic, sub-caste and ideological differences have to be consciously nurtured. Unless this is achieved, the empowerment and the emancipation of enslaved Indians would continue to remain a distant dream.

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