

EDUCATION OF DEPRESSED CLASS WOMEN DURING THE 19th CENTURY

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The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed remarkable changes in India not only in the political sphere. The political sphere the English East India's company rules came to an end and the Crown's rules was established in 1858. Queen's Proclamation declared that all the territories of India would come under the direct rule of the British Crown whose comprehensive selected by the parliament of Great Britain would supervise the administration of the sub-continent. This change in the political arena made a notable impact of the Indian Society and Culture. This was quite manifest in the development of English Education, Socio Religious Reform Movements and the gradual national awakening in the whole of India. Tamilnadu, a significant part of the sub-continent experienced these aspects and their impact on all the communities was quite remarkable The liberal ideas of the western culture and the spread of Christianity among the depressed class in Tamilnadu proved to be the token of liberality and social right. This impact made them to exert themselves for the upliftment of their fellowmen in their community.

Sir Charles Wood's Despatch in 1854, which was described as "the Magna Carta" of English Education in India. highlighted the aim of education as diffusion of Arts, Science, Philosophy and the literature of Europe of the Indians. The English Language was to be taught wherever there was a demand for it. The British System of education brought tremendous changes in the society. The rich cast-Hindus of the Madras Presidency were interested to learn English and to have education through English. But the depressed classes at large were not in a position to study the English Education because of the poor economic and educational background. Hence, they were not in a position to understand the values of English Education. This situation made an impact on the minds of some liberal minded English men and Christian missionaries who were very much considerate towards the welfare of the depressed classes. Therefore the British Government had taken elaborate steps to enquire about the socio-

economic conditions of the “Laboring Classes” such as the Depressed classes, Denotified tribes and the other most backward caste Hindu’s. On the basis of such information, the government finally decided to take some special measures to ameliorate their condition by constituting a separate department called the Labour Department¹ Thus the Woods Despatch gave an impetus not only to the development of education among the high caste Hindus but also among the depressed class men and women in later times. It is in this task that the Christian missionaries also rendered valuable services by establishing schools for all boys and girls irrespective of class distinctions.

Also, it must be pointed out here that in response to growing Christian activity, a few upper caste Tamils in Madras City started a school for their daughters. The first reference to Royapettah Hindu Female School was on 6th June 1854 when its Secretary, T. Gopalakrishnan submitted to the Chief Secretary of the Madras Presidency the second annual report for 1852- 1853 for government inspection. His excellency H. Montgomery, the Governor, responded to this invitation and viewed this Indian interest in female education with gratification and wished for its prosperity and emulation by others² In the next year on 13th March 1855 another social worker, Pillay, perhaps hoping for a grant promised by the 1854 Despatch to indigenous schools, sent his report to the new Chief Secretary T. Pycroft. This was followed by other reformers also in later years and the repressed classes also decided to follow suit.

It is worthy of note that Pillay and his band of reformers attempted to set up though with little success, the earliest known girl’s secular schools in the Madras Presidency in which admission was open to depressed class women also. In 1845 a Council for education was created by some high caste – Hindus to study whether the Panchama girls be admitted in the public schools or not? The report of the committee was received in 1847 and it categorically dismissed that the depressed class people should not be admitted in public schools³.

In 1858 the British Government issued an order according to which the education institutions should be opened to all classes without without any discrimination after the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown. It was generally considered as the beginning of the Government’s direct participation in the education of

the depressed classes. Grants for private schools were suggested for admitting the depressed class children. Side by side, Government took efforts to start separate schools for the depressed class children because of the withdrawal of the high caste Hindu children from the public schools due to the fact that the high caste Hindus did not like the admission of depressed classes in Public schools.

During the middle of the nineteenth century Organisation like the Madras Native Association had exerted themselves more for the development of political awareness among the masses than for the upliftment of the people of lower caste. In 1870, the government transferred the administration of some schools run in Chattrams (inns) to Local Fund Boards that maintained that due to non – availability of buildings separately for operating schools the local authorities engaged the Chattrams and the buildings belonged to them for running the schools. ⁴

In the 1871 Educational Census of Madras it is indicated that a sizable number of pupils belonging to the depressed classes available themselves of the educational opportunities provided by the missionaries. It is stated that totally in the whole of Tamil Nadu there were 1384 boys and 493 girls studying in the schools. But all of them were only in primary school. There were no High Schools established exclusively for depressed classes and their conditions demanded such an establishment. Neither boys or girls from number of depressed classes joined the High schools in those days and such was the condition of the development of education among the depressed class boys and girls. ⁵

In the later part of the nineteenth century, the Government Order No.68 of the Education Department, dated 1st February 1893 was considered as the great boon for the depressed classes and that the day was the Red – Letter Day in the History of education of the depressed classes. This was the result of the efforts made by the Chrisitan missionaries like Adam Andrew. ⁶ The missionary, Adam Andrew of the Free Church of Scotland Mission, spent most of his career in Chengalpat and wrote an article entitled, “The Madras Government and the Pariah in the Harvest Field”⁷. In this article he explained the pitiable condition of the depressed class men and women and lamented over their ignorance, poverty, social condition and social degradation and wanted the strong hand of the Government for their complete emancipation⁸.

A government Report entitled “ A Note on the Pariah of Chengalpat” states that 11,490 children were admitted into schools during 1889 and out of this the Pariah children were 1,443. Among these children 1176 were in mission schools found in Madras, Thiruvallur and Kanchipuram. Government, of Madras released a report in 1891 which states about the educational status of the Thiruvallur Taluk. This Taluk was considered as a pocket of the Pariah population. These depressed classes lived in greater number in this Taluk. Hence, the government has taken this taluk as a model to improve the depressed class population in the field of education⁹. Another notable development took place in 1884 in respect of depressed class peopl’s education in Tamil Nadu. An organisation calles Salvation Army was started in Great Britain in 1865 and the founder was William Booth, a Methodist revivalist¹⁰.

In tamil Nadu, this organisation concentrated its attention on the depressed classes at Vadakuchipalayam Village and three other villages of Villupuram in South Arcot district¹¹. It was due to those schools that the depressed classes were much benefitted and the girls showed much enthusiasm in educational pursuits.¹² Yet, social customs and taboos and the restrictions imposed on the depressed classes by the upper castes deterred them to a great extent to make a bold step for their educational pursuits. In 1882 Mackenzie Cobban of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission along with his family came to Madras and started a small schools as Toluvar in which the entire students were depressed class girls.¹³ The schools became very popular in 1891.

In this task of uplifting the depressed classes, a few organisations had also started taking efforts. While the Mahajana Sabna established in 1884 was trying to bring out an awareness among the people of the Madras Presidency in respect of the political development taking place in the presidency and outside, a few Assopciations were also founded to take care of the social groups of the presidency. An organisation of Adi-Dravidas informally developed in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century strove hard to improve the position of the depressed classes in Tamil Nadu. The Dravida Mahajana Sabha of Madras was one such organisation developed for the purpose of the well being of the depressed class men and women. It was established during 1892 and this Sabha functioned from Madras. It collected an admission fee of Rs. 3 from every member 14. It carried on its activities considerably to offer support and help to depressed class men and

women to pursue education and other developmental activities. Also, in 1893 the petition given by the public, the report of Munro and the suggestions of the missionaries to the Home Government were forwarded to the Parliament of England and it approved that the Panchamas who must be admitted in all schools without any discrimination. On the basis of the Parliament's approval, the Madras Government passed a resolution in 1893 which was considered as the Magna Carta of Panchana education in public and private schools.¹⁵

It is to be pointed out that the Drvida Mahajana Sangam and a few Associations put forward few resolutions for the notice of the Government. It was desired by them that separate schools should be established for the children belonging to depressed classes. They also put forth a few more demands like building for schools should be erected on Puramboke public lands near cheris and all schools must be run Local Bodies and town Municipalities. It is to pointed out that in 1892-93, there were totally 11 schools for girls belonging to the depressed classes¹⁶. This was a significant aspect in the development of education among the depressed class women.

Andrew felt that their G.O. No 68 Education date 1st February 1893 was the Magna Carta of the Depressed Classes with regard to education¹⁷. Thus it can be seen that due to the encouragement by the Government the total number of depressed class students in the schools was 52, 097. (boys 44, 714 and girls 7, 383) during the later years of the nineteenth century. It was reduced to 50, 198 pupils (42, 576 boys and 7,622 girls) in the early part of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Thus, it is to be seen that the depressed class women had no opportunities to pursue education in the 19th century. A stigma that they were not privileged to have education had remained throughout the century. Yet, social reformers and enlightened intellectuals supported the cause of education to the depressed classes, and this helped them to develop their educational pursuits which had been gradually accomplished in the later part of the twentieth century.

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