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A STUDY ON PANCHAMI LAND AND DALITS IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

In Indian context Dalits are considered untouchables. According to 2011 census, 16 % of the population belong to Dalit community. Historically, these people have oppressed on the basis of caste and rights have been refused. Especially, land rights have been denied to Dalits for centuries. Land is a symbol of social status. It also gives power to the society, but only upper caste people owned both agriculture and non- agriculture land. Dalit people were agriculture labours in upper caste people's land and exploited by them. Particularly, in 1891, British government conducted a study on socio-economic condition of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. As a result, British government passed Depressed Classes Land Act in 1892. In Tamil Nadu, 12 lakh acres of land were assigned to Dalits. This land was called as Panchami land. Except Dalits other people could not buy and sell this land. But, till now the struggle for this Panchami land is continuing. Because, Most of the Panchami lands are occupied by non- Dalits. The main objective of this paper is to study the history of Panchami land and the struggle for the ownership of this land. This study was conducted based on secondary sources of data. Findings of this study shows that still, Dalit people are not aware about their rights on this land.

Keywords: Dalits, Rights, Socio-economic condition, Panchami Land, Struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Dr B. R. Ambedkar said that Rural Dalits should be given cultivable land controlled by the government and commons such as grazing land at the Marathwada rally in 1941. According to India Land and Livestock holding survey, nearly 60 per cent of Dalit households did not possess any farmland in 2013. As per the census report of 2011, almost 70 per cent of Dalit farmers are laborers on farms owned by others. The recent Tamil Movie "Asuran" has triggered a knowledge of Panchami Land in Tamil Nadu. Though people of lower strata struggle to rescue their land rights for more than twenty five years, now the movie has thrown a light on this issue

especially among the youth.¹

STATUS OF DALITS

Historically, Dalits are considered as untouchables in India. They occupied lower strata in the society. As per Hindu caste system there are four varnas, Brahmin (Priests), Kshatriya (Warriors and Princes), Vaishya (Farmers and artisans), and Shudra (Servants). In this Dalits are called as out caste group. The word Dalit means “Oppressed” or “Broken”. They are being called by different names in all over India. As per 2011 population census, 16 per cent of the population is Dalits in India. Dalit people have been suffering for long time. Still they are living as untouchables in rural areas. They are refused to enjoy their rights. They should not take water from public well, they are denied to enter in to the temples and even they should not walk on the road where the upper caste people are walking. Still these practices are followed by the people. They are working as landless laborers under upper caste land lords.

LAND RIGHTS

India is dominated by rural population and they are basically depending on agriculture. Nearly, 70 per cent of India’s population living in rural areas. Land is the base for major economic activities. In India the land not only provides economic benefits but it is the symbol of social status. Particularly, in rural India the power and status depend upon the ownership of land holdings. Only the so called upper caste people owned all the land rights. Agriculture land provides economic opportunities as well as the social status to the people in rural society. But the land distribution is not equal in Indian Society particularly in villages. Because in rural society the caste structure plays a vital role. Only the upper caste people own all the means of production. Mostly, the lower caste people work as labourers in the lands of upper caste people. Now, in 21st century also many people are protesting for their land rights. According to 66th National Sample Survey 2009-2010 report, only 17.1 per cent of the scheduled caste population own their agricultural land. It is very less when compared to their total rural population.

LAND REFORM MOVEMENTS

India has launched many land reform movements to provide lands for the poor. Particularly in post-independent India the government focused on redistribution of lands. The Bhudan

¹ <https://uijir.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/UIJIR-JULY257.pdf>

Movement, Gram Dan Movement and Operation Burga are the major land reform movements. Operation Burga was implemented by the Communists in Kerala and West Bengal. Out of these three movements Operation Burga was the successful one.

WHO ARE PANCHAMARS?

The term Varna is used in Hindu texts like Manusmriti. These four varnas are called as savarna. The oppressed people are not included in this layer. Hence, they called out caste people or Panchamars. The land given to these Panchamars is called as Panchami Land.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to know the history of Panchami land and the struggle of this people to get the ownership of this land. Secondary sources of data were collected from newspaper articles and government reports were used in this study.

HISTORY OF PANCHAMI LAND

The lives of Dalits were very worse. These people were referred as Depressed Communities during British Period. They denied all the basic rights by the caste Hindus. They were slaves under the landlords called “Mirasu”. They were living in the temporary tents in Poramboke land. The landlords had right over this Poramboke lands. The government also paid compensation to the landlords for holding this Poramboke lands. Indian Slavery Act 1843, did not prevent landlords from practicing it. Dalit people even sold with the property they owned. “(They are) always badly nourished, clad, if at all, in the vilest of rags, eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases, hunted like pigs, untaught, uncared for....The British administration has freed this clan of a community from the yoke of hereditary slavery and from the legal disabilities; but they still remain at a low depth of social degradation”.²

James Henry Apperley Tremenheere, Acting Collector, Chengleput, 1891. Dalit people especially the Parayar community people were treated as slaves by the caste Hindus. The land deal registered document of 1882, written by ParthasathyMudhaliyar says that, the wetlands, empty lands, groves, wells, Poramboke land, trees, Hidden treasures, stones, slaws and Paracheri (Parayar Hamlets) belong to the buyer and his dynasty. It is very clear that they were treated equal to stones. The Madras famine in 1877 had a great impact on depressed community

² <https://dalithistorymonth.medium.com/understanding-the-history-of-the-panchami-land-struggle-b56f6b950c7c>

people. They were denied any right to land so getting food became a difficult task for them. Hence, huge number of depressed people lost their lives. Then few missionaries were visited Chengelpet in 1879. They understood the pitiable state of these people and wrote to the Deputy Collector and Director of School Education. They also recommended to allocate land to end the terrible status of these people. After a detailed study of the status of this community Collector JHA. Tremmen here submitted a report to the British government to empower them by providing education and land for housing and farming.

PANCHAMI LAND

During British period the acting collector of Chengelpet James Henry Apperley Tremmen here submitted the report about the poor living condition of “Pariahs” the (Depressed Class) to the British parliament in 1891. Based on this report the British government enacted the Depressed Classes Land Act on September 30 under the Government Order No 1010/10-A (Revenue) and allocated 12 lakh acres of land in Madras Presidency to empower them socially and economically in 1892. Buying and selling of this Panchami land is prohibited to other caste people.³

STRUGGLE FOR PANCHAMI LAND

Since 1994, Dalit leaders and various Dalit organizations like Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front, Dalit Land Rights Federation and Dalit Joint Action Committee – Save Panchami Land Movement are fighting to rescue the Panchami lands in Tamil Nadu. In 1994, Dalit NGOs and Dalit leaders conducted a meeting and formed “Dalit Joint Action Committee-Save Panchami Land Movement” (DJAC). The first struggle for Panchami land was started in 1994 to reclaim the Panchami land from non-Dalits. This struggle was happened in Karanai village of Kancheepuram district. In this Karanai village, Vanniyars (Most Backward Caste) are the dominant community. They were numerically high when compared to Dalits in the village. They are politically, socially and economically well developed. They owned their own agricultural lands. At the end of this struggle two youth John Thomas and Ezhumalai were killed in the police firing. This led to violence in the entire state of Tamil Nadu. A huge rally was organized in Chennai. Nearly 15,000 Dalits were participated in this rally. They all spoke about their legal rights on Panchami Land. In Coimbatore alone 5,000 acres of Panchami land

³https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340868878_Memory_as_communication_an_analysis_of_the_Reclamation_of_Panchami_lands

assigned to Dalits. In this most of the lands were encroached by non-Dalits. In Coimbatore North, 24.70 acres of land identified as Panchami land and in Sulur 262.95 acres, in Pollachi 56.82 acres and in Kinathukadavu 4.88 acres of land identified as Panchami lands. According to the report of Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) in Coimbatore, “A man from Dalit community in Sulthanpet Block was tilling a land as a laborer without knowing that he is the owner of that land”. Since 2017, 197 Dalit families are fighting to retrieve their Panchami lands In Sethilpakkam village near Gummidipoondi. Now, these people are living in poramboke lands. These people have said that 35 acres of Panchami land are used for various purposes by the intermediate and upper caste people. According to Dalit Land Rights Federation report, over 1, 84,000 acres of Panchami land were obtained in Cuddalore and Villupuram districts. But, these lands were illegally transferred to private individuals under Updating Registry Scheme (URS). A Non-Dalit family from valanendal village in Tirupparanundram of Madurai district, possessed 4.62 acres of Panchami land. The revenue officials did not take any action against them.

Likewise, almost in every districts, the Panchami Land is being encroached and used for various purposes by the private agencies, upper caste people as well as government bodies.

GOVERNMENT COMMITTEES

The government of Tamil Nadu constituted the first state level retrieve committee in 1991-1996 to study and submit a report for retrieving Panchami lands encroached by non-Dalits and to restore the ownership of Dalits. The second Panel was headed by Justice Maruthamuthu in January 2011. The three member committee was formed on October 8, 2013 with secretaries of revenue and AdiDravidar and Tribal welfare departments.⁴

CONCLUSION

It is very clear that though the government has enacted so many policies and programmes to uplift the status of depressed community of India, still their condition is worse only. Land is an important source for attaining economic as well as social development. With this view the British government provided lands for the Dalit community. Land reforms were made in both colonial and post- colonial period. But, these are not completely succeeded. Still, the depressed

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<https://www.thehindu.com/features/homes-and-gardens/Beware-of-buying-Panchami-lands/article16299293.ece>

people are fighting for their land rights. People were not aware of their land rights due to lack of education. Now, slowly they started raising voice against the discriminations. They come to know about their rights. This study finds that majority of the Panchami lands are occupied by the non-Dalits. The government of Tamil Nadu has formed many committees to regain the occupied lands. This study concludes that the Tamil Nadu government should take essential steps to retrieve the lands from non- Dalit people.

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