

HISTORY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN TAMIL SOCIETY



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Abstract

Tamil Society has gradually moved on the path of social justice from its historical annals until the current day. Education is a crucial aspect of any development. Gender Equality was articulated extensively from the 20th century. From the activities of colonial systems in the Tamil society during the 19th Century, we can understand how the European Enlightenment tradition identified the unequal development of feudal societies that came under colonization.

Religions that were influenced by the colonial, enlightenment traditions began to approach social justice differently. As a by-product, many social movements evolved devoid of religious affiliations and recorded how religions worked against social justice. This paper attempts to explore that interesting history and also the contribution of the Dravidian Movement to instill Social Justice in the social fabric of the current day Tamil Society.

We learn about how the Tamil society moved from its ancient native communities through gradual formation of the State to Empires based on monarchy, through Tamil classical literary and grammatical texts. From the mid- 19th Century onwards the shift to democratic systems of citizenry began to take shape. Therefore, the caste discriminations, religious differences and economic contradictions that were taken for granted thus far came

under scrutiny. They were not accepted as given. These structures were created by the society with vested interests. And all of us are implicated in it. These were seen as factors against social justice. It became imperative to question these. Individuals, social groups and political/ ideological movements brought these under scrutiny in multiple dimensions. At the international level too, these movements took many different forms.

Narrowing our focus to Tamil society we can categorize the discourses on social justice as follows:

The activities of colonial systems in the Tamil society during the 19th Century are to be taken into account. We can understand how the European Enlightenment tradition identified the unequal development of feudal societies that came under colonization. There is a need to hold extensive discussions on those aspects.

Religions that were influenced by the colonial, enlightenment traditions began to approach social justice differently. A debate on how to address inequalities and contradictions were waged. As a by-product, many social movements evolved devoid of religious affiliations. They recorded how religions worked against social justice. It is a very interesting history to be explored.

Division of labour had evolved among the human communities leading to different groups of people based on the work they did. Historically, these divisions got consolidated as castes. Caste structure functions against social justice in ways that are not yet fully articulated. Hence, it is primary to take this into consideration for any discussion on social justice and the modes by which caste worked against it.

In the course of evolution, individuals and their basic needs shaped into a crucial factor. It is obvious that not all the needs are fulfilled for all human beings. And thus, it affects social justice at various levels in the society.

Education is a crucial aspect of any development. But still education for all remains just a dream. This contradiction affects social justice in innumerable ways. The history of access to education is one of the major aspects of social justice.

Gender has been a contested terrain over many centuries. In the 20th century it was articulated extensively. It is imperative to look at how the concept of gender equality has existed or not existed in Tamil society from the perspective of social justice.

I am attempting to focus on the discussions on social justice in the above-mentioned domains in relation to Tamil society here.

By mid- 19th century colonial rule was firmly established in the Tamil context. With the fall of Tippu Sultan, colonial rule spread to the Southern parts of India freely. It was colonialism that brought the prevalent systems of caste, religion and education in the Tamil region under question. The colonial administration became aware that the tribal, scheduled castes and artisans were oppressed in the society. Right from the 16th century onwards, Christian Missionaries have worked to liberate the oppressed sections of people from caste shackles. Once the governance was under the British, they started legislating the reforms into laws. Slavery was abolished. Among the scheduled castes – specifically the paraiyars – found conversion to Christianity as a means of liberation. That freed them from both caste and religious oppressions. This occurred differently in different regions with minute variations. Untouchability became a cruelty in public

sphere and that it is against social justice was established. There were sporadic efforts to accommodate these sections within the existing religious systems. But none of them addressed untouchability or attempted to change that material basis earlier. Saivite and Vaishnavite texts do not contain any record of anti-untouchability.

Colonialism undertook various measures to liberate the people from caste shackles. They were sent as 'coolies' – or contract labourers – to South Africa, various islands on the coast, Burma, Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. It is a tragic turn in Tamil society that from untouchability they moved to being coolies. It is a milestone in Tamil history that migration became the crux of fighting against untouchability and extreme polarization of class.

From early 19th century colonialism introduced education – for the oppressed castes and women – by bringing modern education through new school systems. It is the anchor of education that has helped the Paraiyar and Nadar communities to achieve a significant change in the society over these 150 years. It is quite unique to the history of Tamil Nadu. When we look at the changes in the social sphere of the oppressed castes and women critically, we realize the significance of the dialectic of social justice.

The contribution of colonialism in the sphere of languages is equally significant. The notion of 'Dravidian languages' became possible through the efforts of colonial scholarship. Ellis (1777 - 1819) and Caldwell (1814 -1891) are two key

figures we need to be grateful for this achievement. Before that the primacy of Sanskrit remained unquestioned. It was consolidated by the dominant Brahmanical caste. Right from the pre-historic times Sanskrit was projected as the language of the Gods and later as the language of the rulers and therefore remained associated with hierarchy and authority. Colonial discovery of the family of Dravidian languages led to a drastic reversal of that ideology.

Colonialism denied the practice of non-acknowledgement of the ancient Tamil language in public sphere and the pressure of Sanskrit being the rulers' tongue. Therefore, Tamil language got liberated and the Tamils gained their ethnic identity through their language. The contradiction between the language of power and regional languages came to be questioned. Social justice of the languages was established through identification of linguistic families, printing of manuscripts and institutionalization of archeological findings. It is due to these efforts that the ancient history of Tamils, changes in the evolution of Tamil paleography and the material culture of the ancient Tamils were projected in the public sphere. We can consider these as the colonial contribution to social justice of the Tamil society.

In practice, we know that the polarized binary of Sanskrit / Tamil still continues. The cultural debate on Vedic and non-Vedic philosophy and practice, the unique features of the South Indian Dravidian languages family, the unbroken history of Tamils from pre-historic era onwards

and the specific aspects of culture based on Tamil in the Dravidian, South Indian contexts became established in public sphere by the end of 19th century. Earlier ancient Indian history dealt with 3500 BCE to roughly about 500 CE. These re-discoveries proved beyond doubt the parallel existence of Dravidian cultures. Erasing that fact was an injustice meted out to the Tamils because of the support of State, culture and practices based on the primacy of Sanskrit. Colonialism interrogated that hierarchy and put the Tamil society on the map. The commemoration of Tirukkural by early colonial scholars led us to liberate ourselves from the Manu smriti.

It is important to deliberate upon the role played by the institutions of religions from the point of view of social justice over time. We learn about the system of social justice in the ancient Tamil society through the classical texts. Post- 19th century, with the advent of Christianity, the negotiations led by religion changed in many ways. In order to face the spread of Christianity, the religious systems that were in practice already, assimilated some of the values of Christianity and worked on reforming their religions. Brahma Samaj, Ramakrishna Mutt were some examples we can mention here. Brahma Samaj denied idol worship; it also negated many rituals. Theosophy – an amalgamation of all religions- was formed. These started in Kolkata initially and spread to other parts of India. However, in Tamil society, there was a section that continued the Buddhist traditions; Jainism was also present in many quarters. But Tamil

region is perhaps the first to argue that religions in general - and Hinduism in particular – was against social justice of all kinds.

In 1878, Athippakkam Venkatachalanar published a manuscript called Hindu Matha Abasadarshini (Obscenities of Hinduism Exposed). That text denied all the aspects of Hinduism. He was a supporter of the Madras Secular Society. This organization was the Chennai chapter of the London Secular Society inspired by the European Enlightenment heritage, that questioned religious beliefs and practices. The Madras Secular Society published two magazines: The Thinker in English and Thaththuva Vivesini in Tamil between 1882 – 1888. (I have worked in detail on this organization and collated their publications that are available, in six volumes.) This group deserves to be highlighted in the light of social justice in Tamil society. They argued against religions; proved in minute detail how religions are opposed to social justice; opposed women's suppression and discrimination; and strongly fought against superstitions. These are the people who fought for social justice at the end of the 19th century in Tamil Nadu. They inherited the Enlightenment system of knowledge and analytical thinking. They addressed issues of social justice like caste discriminations, religious bigotry, gender inequities and poverty. This historical milestone has not yet been discussed in Tamil society fully. But we need to realize that this was the historical continuity that led to the many struggles for social justice in the 20th century Tamil Nadu.

References to caste are strewn in many sources in Tamil. There are also records of compromises among castes. Only in the 19th century the voice critiquing caste as being basically against social justice came about. The primary place for raising that voice goes to Ramalinga Adikal aka Vallalaar (1823 -1874). He promulgated a concept called samarasa sanmarkkam (Path of Universal Truth). He opposed the Vedic religions. Hence, he ruled out varnashrama built on Vedic practices. He created a new Manu Needhi (New Manu Dharma). Vallalar made a modernist intervention in the system of caste contradictions. The 20th century anti – caste movements in Tamil Nadu owe a great deal to Vallalar.

Colonial administration also formed many new departments like Judiciary, Education, Public Works, Revenue and such. A new class of employees who became part of these departments did lesser physical labour and more non-physical, intellectual labour. In most of these departments the dominant caste of Brahmins occupied almost 98% of positions. The traditional varnashrama practice found a new face of domination and authority. It was in the 19th century when caste and religion came under public debate that this new administrative authority took shape. During monarchic reigns Brahminism and Sanskrit domination were endorsed by the rulers. As against that, the new republics refused to accept them lying low. Gods, Hinduism, Brahminism and Sanskrit were part of the nexus that worked against social justice. This revelation came to the fore in the 19th century. There was a revival of

Tamil Buddhism to counter this hoary past. Aryan vs Dravidian discourses were emphasized. Dravidianism stood against all the above - mentioned dominations. Many organisations were founded on the concept of Dravidianism. They functioned in myriad ways: Dravidar Manavar Sangam (Dravidian Students Association) (1912), Thenninthiya Nalaurimai sangam (South Indian Welfare Association) (1916), Justice Party (1917), Chennai Magana Sangam (Madras Presidency Association) (1919), Suyamariyaathai Iyakkam (Self Respect Movement) (1925) are a few major outfits. Many of these focused on non-Brahmin people's welfare. All of them had a component of social justice. Self-Respect movement provides the amalgamation of all their identities. It cannot be denied that the activities of Self-respect movement, especially the contribution of Periyar E V Ramasami, is equivalent to the summary of social justice in the 20th Century Tamil society. His struggle for social justice can be summed up as follows:

Between 1919 – 1925, Periyar was in the Congress. In all their conferences the glaring caste contradictions of the South Indian societies came to the front. In each conference Periyar brought up the issue of reservation. Since the Congress leadership was essentially Brahminical, it did not accept his recommendation. Hence, he quit the Congress and formed the Self- Respect movement and announced Communal Representation or reservation as its axis.

Caste is initiated and protected by religion. Religions protect gods. And Brahmins remain the key operators of

these systems. Periyar opposed God, religion and Brahminism in one stroke. He believed that we can annihilate caste and remove the economic disparities. He exposed the domination of the forces that made caste exist as a reality. He involved himself in all the anti- caste activities. That became the clarion call for social justice in Tamil society.

He waged a lifelong struggle against the literatures, Vedic texts and superstitions that scaffolded the above-discussed contradictions. He criticized Sanskrit Puranic literatures and epics such as Ramayana vehemently. He propagated how these texts spread concepts against social justice in every nook and corner of the State. He hoped to build a just society accessible for all by these activities.

He centered the women's question in all his views and practices. He argued that women's liberation is a pre-condition for social justice to come into force and be extended. Without women's liberation he did not see the possibility of complete social justice. The fact that many women rallied around his views from all walks of life still remains an unprecedented saga of social justice in Tamil society. Periyar pioneered the feminist discourse in 1930's Tamil society.

Periyar dedicated himself to social justice and fought against caste and gender discrimination through many different alternate structures, reservation being the chief among them. He founded many organizations and published journals and

pamphlets towards that end. We have a rich treasure house of resources to learn from.

Modern education has led to newer ways of economic aspects in Tamil society from early 20th century. Government and factories offered new openings. The necessity to have reservation in all these institutions based on caste, gender, minority religions and class was recognized earlier on. Struggles to incorporate an inclusive reservation system began in early 20th century in Tamil Nadu. Caste becomes a unit of reference for this end. Since caste is oppressive, communities discriminated by that system are entitled to reservations. That process enabled many from the subaltern sections to enter into employments. We can assess the impact of reservation as a tool of social justice in Tamil society through the data available on scheduled castes, middle castes- Backward and Most Backward -, and women over more than five decades. This is in stark contrast to the rest of the nation in India, both in education, employment and access to resources. It is a historical social justice event in Tamil society. This has helped the downtrodden communities to come out of their chEris – ghettos – and become part of the mainstream society. It has become one of the means to escape caste atrocities. It is important to relate the role of reservation and economic changes as part of the nexus of social justice. One needs to trace the time it takes to reach this level of recognizable equality and equity.

To sum up

The history of social justice in Tamil society is documented in the classical literary and grammatical works and ethical texts like Tirukkural. Monarchies that were established later made varnashrama the norm. All discriminations based on caste, economy, gender and culture were taken as 'given' and legitimized. This trend continued for a long time till the 19th century.

Once the colonial rule took over, these contradictions came under scrutiny. Caste domination, linguistic authority, class disparities and women's oppression were recognized as factors denying social justice for all. Many reformist movements were formed. They sought to set right the course of social justice that has been skewed hitherto.

Many organizations based on social justice were formed in the 20th century, chief among them being the Self-Respect movement of Periyar. The social shifts that occurred through his interventions is the most significant part of the history of social justice in Tamil society. As he himself articulated social justice is a pre-condition for social revolution!

(The above paper was presented at the 3rd International Humanism Conference on Social Justice – Toronto during Sep 2022.)

About the Author

Dr. Vee. Arasu is a retired Professor who served at the Department of Tamil

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He led the Curriculum Redesign Committee of the Eastern University, Sri Lanka and University of Malaysia. He served as the Visiting Professor and External Examiner at the Univ. of Malaysia for three consecutive years. He has delivered Endowment Lectures at various universities in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.

49 Scholars have completed their Ph.D. under his guidance. He has published 4 volumes of selected articles. He has over 30 monographs on different aspects of Tamil society and culture to his credit. He has edited over 70 volumes on many authors, subjects and fields. Va. Vu. Si, Jeevan, Madras Secular Society, Mayilai Seeni Venkatasami, Athippakkam Venkatachalanar and Puthumaippithan are some of the edited volumes that deserve mention. He has served on the advisory committees of Sahitya Akademi, National Book Trust, National Mission for Manuscripts and other committees within the state and abroad. There are over 70 lectures of Arasu online.

Arasu's primary field of study is the social history of the Tamils. He has undertaken many studies on Tamil classical and modern literatures. He has

paid special attention to 19th century social context, especially in the light of print culture. Many of his students continue the traditions set by him. He has travelled to Malaysia, Singapore, Sri

Lanka, Czech Republic, Paris, London and Canada for academic purposes. Arasu is happy and proud to have created a vibrant generation of student-scholars.