

ARUNDHATHIYAR - THE WEAKEST OF THE WEAK AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR "RESERVATION WITHIN RESERVATION"

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Abstract

Arundhathiyar are called in Tamil Nadu in various names like Thottis, Chakkiliyan, Sakkilian, Madiga, Madigan, Adi Andhra, and Adi Karnataka. They are also known as Madari and Pagadai communities. Among these Sakkiliyan is the most familiar name used to address these people. The Chakkiliyans, Mr. H. A. Stuart writes, they are the leather-workers of the Tamil Nadu, corresponding to the Madigas of the Telugu country.¹ The Chakkiliyans appear to be immigrants from the Telugu Desha and Andhrapradesh or Canarese region, for no mention is made of this aster either in the early Tamil inscriptions, or in early Tamil literature and Ballets. Moreover, a very large proportion of the Chakkiliyans speak Telugu and Canarese. Keywords: Sakkiliyan, Hindu varna, Arundhathiyars, Panchama, social burdens, rehabilitation measures

Scholars and activists like Adiyaman, founder of Aathi Thamizhar Peravai, and Elangovan say that the term "Sakkiliyan" is used in a context of humiliation because it was derived from the word "Shakuli" which means a person who eats dead cow, who is blind, a coward, and a slave.² Hence the term "Sakkiliyan" should be replaced by Arundhathiyar. It is believed that the word "Arundhathiyar" refers to a women who was known for her purity and virginity. Arundhathiyars are considered by upper castes to be outside the traditional Hindu varna order. They are considered as Panchama, or the fifth group, beyond the four-fold division of Hindu society. The economist and reform B.R.Ambedkar 1891-1956) popularised the term. Arundhathiyars were excluded from the four-fold Varna system and formed the unmentioned fifth; they were also called Panchama. The Arundhathiyar occupy the lowest rank in social position. They are mainly associated with menial jobs and seemed to have disturbed adversely the socio- economic freedom of the people.³ The majority of the Arundhathiyar are treated as untouchable.⁴ Irrespective of cities or villages, Arundhathiyars in Tamil Nadu are forced to work as cobblers on streets, roads and busstands.⁵ For long they have been suppressed and with minimum or no wages their livelihood becomes a question mark. The social burdens add to their woes and subsequent governments have ignored the state of the cobblers and have not cared to address their rehabilitation measures. The occupations of Arundhathiyars in Tamil Nadu government remain in total of 100% as manual scavengers in corporations and municipalities. Other predominant occupation of the community is either to be a cobbler in sides of the streets or as enslaved bonded labourers in agricultural fields. Arundhathiyars are considered as the depressed classes by the upper caste Hindus of the very lowest status were undergoing untold persecutions⁶ they are not organized and they have also been discriminated against by other depressed sections.

Hence their social status is artificially depressed below other scheduled castes suffering from lack of social, political and economic empowerment.⁷ They asserted their identity by rewriting histories and agitating against the injustice done to them.⁸ To break this cycle of institutionalization various Arundhathiyar organizations like Tamil Nadu Arundhathiyar Sangam which was formed in 1958, is one of the oldest Arundhathiyar organizations working for the rights of Arundhathiyars have struggled for special schemes and reservations from the government for the past 25 years.⁹

Protective or Positive discriminations in Education and Government jobs are very essential to establish social justice in a society. The struggle for "reservation within reservation" was intensified On 12th June 2007 with a rally organised by Adiyaman, founder of Aathi Thamizhar Peravai along with N. Varadarajan of Communist Party of India(M) in Chennai, in which naerly 30,000 Arunthathiyar people participated. This event was a turning point in the fight for inner

reservation The Adhi Thamizhar Peravai, together with the Communist Party of India (M), later held many demonstrations and meetings to press their demands for separate reservation.

The State government responded with the formation of a welfare board for Arundhathiyars and in the following year on 23rd January 2008 the Hon' TN Governor's address in the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly included inner reservation for Arundhathiyars. The chief minister Karunanidhi promised to consider the issue and scheduled an all parties meeting regarding the inner reservation issue on 12th March 2008 to discuss the sub-quota demand. And a special invitation was sent to Athiyman met all the political party leaders to gather the support for inner reservation for Arundhathiyars. 27 political parties participated in the all party meeting held on 12th March 2008. All political parties present in the meeting supported inner reservation for Arundhathiyars. Further, when the chief minister proposed for a 2.35% inner reservation base on 2001 Indian government census, Athiyaman objected and demanded a 6% inner reservation.

Hence the chief minister appointed a one man commission headed by the chief justice Janarthanan for its recommendations, which became effective on 25th March, 2008.¹⁰ Athiyamaan along with office bearers of Aathi Thamizhar Peravai met the chief justice Janarthanan on 18th August 2008 and submitted an appeal. On 22nd November 2008 the one man commission headed by the chief justice Janarthanan submitted its recommendations for a 2.88% inner reservation for Arundhathiyars. Following the low percentage recommendation, Aathi Thamizhar Peravai convened a meeting under the auspices of Athiyamaan for all Tamil Nadu Arundhathiyar organizations in Chennai on 26th November 2008 to discuss the issue.¹¹

All the leaders of various Arundhathiyar organizations in Tamil Nadu along with Athiyamaan met the chief minister on 27th November 2008. As per there commendation of the commission, chief minister Kalaingar Karunanidhi informed the leaders of the decision of allotting a 3% inner reservation for sincere efforts in bringing up the inner reservation issue. Further he requested for a 6% reservation considering the social status and population of the Arundhathiyar community. The chief minister asked them to accept the 3% reservation until further increase in the future. On the same day the Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam government passed a resolution in principle for 3% inner reservation for Arundhathiyar community. Furthermore to enable the resolution into law the government formed a committee headed by the minister K. Ponmudi. In a step ahead on 21st December 2008, Athiyamaan submitted a petition to the chief minister's special cell, requesting to speed up the process of enactment of inner reservation into law.

On 12th March 2009, the Tamil Nadu government gazette published an extraordinary act to provide special reservation for Arundhathiyar and was vigorously enforced. The act came into effect from 29th April 2009 with a minor change in the G.O. MS No: 61 dated 29th May 2009 were published.¹² Even though only few months have been passed since the issue of the act, the Arundhathiyar community has tasted the benefits of the reservation.

The men and women of the community are registering their names in employment exchanges.¹³ In education, only 17 seats were filled in medical (MBBS) seats in the year 2008 but due to the inner reservation there has been 86 and above medical seats were filled in 2009. In engineering (B.E.,) there were greater than 4000 seats occupied in 2009 compared to 681 seats in the year 2008. Similarly lecturer and professor vacancies in government colleges and teacher vacancies in educational institutions have been filled on the basis of inner reservation scheme. Aathi Thamizhar Peravai has approached proper channels to receive the statistical figures through the Right to Information Act. Currently Aathi Thamizhar Peravai has started to fight for the inner reservation for Arundhathiyars in central government and in public sectors, as given in Tamil Nadu. To this effect Aathi Thamizhar Peravai had organized a demonstration in New Delhi at Janthar Manthar on 23rd November 2009. The State Government said that the Arundhathiyars were given a special reservation of three per cent, out of 18 per cent meant for Scheduled Castes,¹⁴ in education and in government employment following the Governor's address in the Assembly in the year 2008 that they were "still remaining as untouchables among the untouchables".¹⁵ Still the Arundhathiyar community is considered as the lowest and the last and the weakest of the weak from among the castes of the Scheduled Castes.

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