

The Hazards of Passing on the Hereditary Occupation: A Study on the Identity and Occupation of Arunthathiyar Community in India

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Abstract

In caste-based Indian society, occupation is hereditarily determined and passed on to the younger generations of the respective castes though by law there is freedom to choose one's occupation. The lower castes are considered to be impure and perform jobs which are unclean and menial. This paper analyzes the hereditary occupation of the Arunthathiyar community, who are considered to be the lowest caste in the society, living in Janglapuram Village, Tirupattur District, Tamil Nadu. They are traditionally engaged in manufacturing of winnowers made of bamboo; their identity is tied to this occupation. In recent years, most of the younger generation of this community prefer white-collar jobs over the hereditary occupation for social and economic reasons. The social reason is the low status accompanying the hereditary occupation both among the Arunthathiyar community and the people from other caste communities; on the other hand, white-collar professions are appreciated and acclaimed. Besides, there is more caste-based discrimination in the rural villages than in the bigger cities. The economic reason is that there are a lot of opportunities of well-paid white-collar jobs in the bigger cities. However, there is a dichotomy of thinking between two types of people among the members of Arunthathiyar community, whether to keep up the identity of the Arunthathiyar community by continuing the hereditary occupation or to take up the white-collar jobs with the view of increasing social recognition.

Introduction

In the Indian Society, Caste is the dominant social structure which transmits a way of life hereditarily. It determines one's occupation, social customs, religious rituals, social status and so on in the Indian society. In the ancient India, following the Division of Labor (*Varna Dharma*), the labors are hereditarily determined and handed over to the younger generations of the respective castes. It was accepted as one's own *karma* (predestined thing) by the people of younger generations and there was less chance for the occupational mobility in the society. In the caste system of India, the people of lower castes (Dalits or Scheduled Castes), who consist of 3 sub-castes Pallar, Paraiyar and Arunthathiyar, are considered to be impure and untouchable from birth. They are made to perform jobs which are traditionally considered to be unclean and menial. The community of Arunthathiyar is considered to be the lowest among

the lower castes. The Arunthathiyars are associated with scavenging the drains, septic latrines, sewage pits, removal of human excreta, sweeping, cleaning, and human and cattle corpses etc as their traditional occupation. Some of the Arunthathiyars are artists, painters, craftsmen and engaged in leather and embroidery works. This paper focuses on the hereditary occupation (*Kula Thozhil* in Tamil language) of an Arunthathiyar community located in the Janglapuram village in the district of Tirupattur in Tamil Nadu, India. This paper consists of three parts. The first part deals with the socio-religio-historical reasons for caste based hereditary occupation. The second part analyses the present condition of Arunthathiyar community in the Indian society. The third part presents the survey on hereditary occupation of Arunthathiyar community in Janglapuram village in the district of Tirupattur, Tamil Nadu, India.

I. Different Dimensions of Caste and Hereditary Occupation

Hereditary occupation based on caste has been practiced in the Indian society from time immemorial. However, scholars of the Indian caste system cannot agree on a common explanation on the origin and dynamics of caste and hereditary occupation. Though there are no rules mandating the caste-based occupation in recent times, we see the reality of hereditary occupation by many people of different castes particularly in rural villages. Louis Dumont reports that hereditary occupation is diminishing but there is still considerable stability of certain trades which are mostly village specialties, and often bear the mark of religion: 76 percent of sweepers follow their profession, 75 percent of goldsmiths, more than 60 percent of confectioners and grain parchers, 60 percent of barbers and washermen, and 50 percent of carpenters, weavers, oil-pressers and potters [Dumont 1980: 96]. There are different interpretations on caste-based occupation from historical, religious, social, economic, colonial points of view. Let us have an analytical study on them.

There are different definitions and descriptions of the caste system. Velassery defines it as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior or inferior rank of social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions [Velassery 2005: 2]. Thus, the status of the person depends on type of the work one does. Historically, it is believed that the caste system began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BCE. When they arrived, their main contact was with the aborigines, Dravidians. Unfortunately, the Aryans completely disregarded the local cultures and began conquering regions all over north India and pushing the locals towards the south. The Aryans possessed a particular principle of social ordering called the *Varna* System,¹ which was based on the four hierarchical divisions of function in society. Each class has its own distinctive set of duties and functions. Smith classifies the functions of the four groups as follows. *Brahmins* are charged with religious and priestly tasks, *Kshatriyas* with defense and political rule, *Vaishyas* with agriculture and trade, and Shudras with servitude [Smith 1994: 9]. In the caste system, Shudras are considered to be

¹ *Varna*, according to Hindu scriptures, refers to the classification of people based on their qualities. The term is derived from the Sanskrit word, *vr*, which means “to describe,” “to classify” or “to cover.” *Varna* is classified into four types: *brahman*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra*.

hierarchically low in the roles of laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants. They are considered to be untouchables performing occupations that are considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are, therefore, defined as the outcastes. Each *varna* is divided into numerous sub-castes or *jatis*. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, *Jati*, also spelled *jat*, caste, in Hindu society. The term is derived from the Sanskrit *jāta*, “born” or “brought into existence,” and indicates a form of existence determined by birth. In Indian Philosophy, *jati* (genus) describes any group of things that have generic characteristics in common. Sociologically, *jati* has come to be used universally to indicate a caste group among Hindus. In the history of Indian society, the people in the same occupation became a group with the same identity and affinity among themselves. Skehon says that each *jati* is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation [Sekhon 2000: 40–41]. People become members of a caste through birth and acquire appropriate occupations as a result.

Though the caste system is an artificial social stratification, it was socially legitimized by the high caste Brahmins by adding a religious color so that the people of lower castes could acquiesce to the caste system without any opposition and agitation. The caste system was rationalized in ancient India on various grounds. One of them was the justification in the Vedas. The *Purushu Sukta* in the 10th Mandala of the *Rigveda* describes how the castes came into existence: from different parts of the *Purusha*, the Cosmic Soul, at the time of a grand sacrifice performed by the gods. The *Brahmins* came out of his mouth, the *Kshatriyas* from his arms, the *Vaiyshas* from his thighs, and the *Shudras* from his feet. Smith states that *Brahmins* are charged with religious and priestly tasks, *Kshatriyas* with defense and political rule, *Vaishyas* with agriculture and trade, and *Shudras* with servitude. The theoretical enunciation of the caste system found in the *Dharmaśāstra*² further legitimized the social doctrine of hierarchical caste system in the *Vedas* [Smith 1994: 9]. It emphasizes the importance of continuing the hereditary occupation as the prime duty in order to attain liberation (*moksha*). Smith states that the another justification of caste system derives from the theory of *Karma*. According to the theory of *Karma*, the consequences of past decisions have determined one’s present state [Smith 1994: 10]. The concept of rebirth plays a huge role in the prevention of people revolting against the continuation of hereditary occupation in the caste system. The concept of rebirth was created by the Aryans in order to justify the oppressive behavior imposed on the indigenous people and to keep the people from rising up against the system. Rebirth justifies caste oppression in two ways. For the people of higher castes, it justifies the privileges and domination over the lower castes. For the people of lower castes, it gives a reason to accept the present condition of oppression and blame themselves for their troubles being born in the low castes as a result of the bad *Karma* in their past life. This concept rationalizes the hereditary occupation in the caste system based on birth. Hindu *dharma* teaches low-caste people that the way to improve their position in their next life is by being faithful to the given occupation in this life without any agitation. For Hindus, *dharma* is the moral order of the universe and a code of living that embodies the fundamental principles of law, religion, and duty that governs all

² *Dharmaśāstra* is a genre of Sanskrit theological texts and refers to the treatises of Hinduism on way of life.

reality. The Hindu worldview asserts that is won by following one's *dharma*, a person can eventually achieve liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). In the traditional Hindu view, a person's duties are dependent upon his or her age, gender, occupation, and caste; *dharma* is construed at least in part in terms of prescribed rituals and caste obligations. Thus, hereditary occupation is legitimized by religious interpretations.

The hereditary occupation, known as the *jajmani* system, was a widely practiced economic structure in the Indian villages, surviving up to the arrival of British in India. Dumont mentions that those who are part of this system do not always use or even know the word *jajmani*. The word *jajmani* comes from the Sanskrit *yajamana* which means 'sacrificer'; etymologically the *jajman* is the master of the house who employs a Brahman as a sacrifice. A Hindi dictionary defines *jajman* as one who has religious rites performed by Brahmans by giving them fees [Dumont 1980: 9]. Gough defines the *jajmani* system as "a feudalistic system of prescribed, hereditary obligations, of payment and of occupational and ceremonial duties, between two or more specific families of different castes in the same locality [Gough 1960: 83–91]." Under the *jajmani* system, the village was essentially a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste families. Dumont says that there are a few principles behind the *jajmani* system. In the first place, it makes use of hereditary personal relationships to express the division of labour: each family has a family of specialists at its disposal for each specialized task [Dumont 1980: 98]. In the village that Wisner studied, he found that "there were twenty-four castes fixed by birth—priest and teacher, bard and geologist, accountant, goldsmith, florist vegetable grower, rice grower, carpenter, ironworker, barber, water-bearer, shepherd, grain parcher, seamster, potter, trade man, oil-presser, washerman, mat-maker, leather worker, sweeper and cess pool cleaner, Mohammedan beggar, Mohammedan glass bangle seller, Mohammedan cotton-carder, and Mohammedan dancing girl [Velassery 2005: 2]." Each individual had a fixed economic and social status. It can be seen from the above list of caste distinctions that the web of economic stability and security that was provided by an individual's respective caste and by those relationships the individual acquired through his or her occupation was essential to village life. Dumont says that the *jajmani* system also regulates prestations and counter-prestations in a way which accords with custom: for the usual tasks, repayment is in kind: it is not made individually for each particular prestation but is spread over the whole year, as is natural for a permanent relationship in agricultural setting: a little food may be provided each day, and there is always the right to a fixed quantity of grain at harvest time, and finally there are obligatory presents (often of money) on the occasion of the main festivals of the year [Dumont 1980: 98]. In the *jajmani* system, there was lack of a power balance and equal mutual benefits. The castes which held the land were dominant enjoying economic power through controlling the means of subsistence and political power. On the other hand, the castes, which did not have land, were insecure and dissatisfied with their share of the economic sources and political power. According to Gough, there were inter-caste disputes resulting from conflicts of interest between the employers (*jajmans*) and the employees (*kamins*). The disputes were settled by village *panchayats* (village councils) which was mostly formed by the dominant caste's employers (*jajmans*) of the village and the settlement of the disputes has been a matter of the high castes reasserting their control

[Gough 1960: 89]. Thus, inequality and injustice prevailed in the traditional hereditary occupational system. In modern times, there is a decline in the continuation of hereditary occupations. However, those still engaged in the traditional skills and trades continue to be mainly from the caste specialized occupations. Discrimination against people doing lower status hereditary occupations continues to be prevalent.

The fluidity of the caste system was affected by the arrival of the British. British policies of divide and rule contributed towards the hardening of caste identities; Knapp says that the British encouraged the practice of casteism to increase the divisions between people [Knapp 2016: 24]. In 1935, British government took census of the local population according to caste. They recorded what they believed was a legitimate and inflexible system based largely on the Brahmanical interpretation, retaining the position of the Brahmins as the dominant group [Sekhon 2000: 41]. British policies accepted the Brahman views of castes that do the unclean tasks as untouchables or scheduled castes. The census listed 400 groups as untouchables. The British government assigned the important jobs of public service to people from higher castes. Ghurye cites the example that the Bengal Army was composed largely of the higher castes such as Brahmins and the Rajputs [Ghurye 2004: 284]. The people from lower castes were not recruited for the higher services of the country. The British government maintained the status quo of the hereditary occupation. However, the skillful occupations such as artists, tailoring, shoemaking, draft making and cabinet making were appreciated with high esteem. At one point of time, many members of the Brahmin caste were engaged in almost any of the occupations, except those of casual laborer, sweeper, and scavenger. Many members of the various artisan castes were employed as teachers, shopkeepers, bank clerks, shop assistants and architects [Ghurye 2004: 296]. Due to the development of big industries in the metropolitan cities, a certain number of traditional caste-linked crafts diminished due to a large number of imported manufactured goods from the metropolis. Because of this, many weavers had to turn to agriculture. In other places, occupations that had been passed down from generation to generation had to be closed down because of newly opened factories. Thus, during the British rule in India, the status quo of the hereditary occupation was kept up; yet, we see the disappearance of a few caste-based occupations and the appearance of new occupations performed by different castes responding to the needs of the time.

There has been a significant change in the occupational pursuits in the modern India notably from 1954 to 1992. Earlier, most people were engaged in their traditional caste-related occupations, such as blacksmithing, tanning, pottery making. Many have now taken up newer occupations that do not relate to their caste, such as government jobs, teaching, retail and services, and machine repair. Wealth and power in the village is now less associated with caste than before and landownership has become more diversified. Also, the idea that purity and pollution are caused by the lower castes has diminished a good amount. In rural areas, movement out of castes specializing occupations and access to resources is still difficult and slow for the lower castes, but in urban areas, caste is now a less significant part of daily life. Sekhon observes that although discrimination on the basis of caste has been outlawed in India, caste has become a means for competing for access to resources and power in modern India, such as educational opportunities, new occupations, and improvement in life opportunities

[Sekhon 2000: 45]. There is a significant change in occupational specialization by caste, mostly because of a decline in traditional occupations and the rise of industrialization and related modern occupations. There has been a corresponding decline in the institution of patron-client relations known as the *jajmani* system, in which workers performing specialized occupations using traditional skills and trades continue to be mainly from the caste specializing in that occupation [Sekhon 2000: 47]. The Government of India has instituted preferential policies for the people of lower castes such as Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and the other Backward Classes (OBCs), that they get easier access to government jobs, opportunities in public sector enterprises, and in state-supervised educational institutions. However, only a relatively small proportion of the lower castes and classes have benefited from these policies.

To summarize the dynamics of hereditary occupation in Indian society, the caste related hereditary occupation has gone through different changes influenced by the socio-economic-political situations of different times of Indian history. Aryans created the varna system keeping themselves high in the hierarchical caste system with the priestly occupation. They assigned different jobs to the people of other castes and treated them as lower than them. In order to avoid the agitation from the lower castes, they legitimized and rationalized the system with religious reasoning. As the number of hereditary occupations increased, the people doing the same occupation became a group with the same identity and affinity among themselves forming different *Jatis* (castes). Each *jati* is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation. Later, the hereditary occupation as an economic structure was very much practiced known as *jajmani* system in the Indian villages until the arrival of British in India. The *jajmani* system is considered to be a food-providing unit, where each family of the craft or service caste was linked with one or more of the land owning-farmer-caste family. There was lack of equality and justice between the people of high and lower castes in this system. The castes which held the land were dominant enjoying economic and political power. The British government in India with their divide and rule policy made use of caste divisions among the people of India and made the caste system inflexible and institutional. They recruited from the higher castes for government and higher jobs, neglecting the people of lower castes for these higher positions. However, in the modern times there is no hard and fast rules to continue the hereditary occupation; yet, we see the continuation of hereditary occupations in the rural villages of India. Some of the jobs are still considered to be impure and the people engaged in them are discriminated against in society. In modern India, the Government of India has various preferential policies for the people from lower castes doing so called polluted hereditary occupations so that they have more opportunities to government jobs. Caste related hereditary occupation has gone through various changes throughout the history of modern India. Though there is freedom to choose one's own occupation, we still see a tendency of discrimination towards the workers in so called polluted hereditary occupations.

II. The Present Condition of Arunthathiyar community

The Arunthathiyar community is one of the Dalit castes. The word 'Dalit' is commonly used to denote people of the lower castes. The term is derived from the Sanskrit root '*dal*' which means to crack, open, split, and so on. When used as a noun or adjective it means burst, split, broken or torn asunder, downtrodden, scattered, crushed, destroyed, etc. [Zelliot 1992: 267]. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890), one of the social reformers of India, seems to have been the first to use the word Dalit in connection with caste in the term '*dalitodhar*,' and he described it as the upliftment of the oppressed. However, it was Ambedkar (1891–1956) who coined the term 'Dalit' to describe the oppressed and broken victims of the caste-ridden society [Murugkar 1991: 6]. During the 1970s, the "Dalit Panther Movement" of Maharashtra gave additional meaning to the term "Dalit" as a constant reminder of the age-old oppression in the caste system, denoting both the state of deprivation and the people who are oppressed [Joshi 1986: 141]. The word Dalit is also a Marathi word, its literal meaning being "those who have been broken, ground down by those above them in a deliberate and active way [Zelliot 1992: 267]." Hence, this term is expressive of their existence and experience, and it indicates an aggregate of all the outcastes. However, in the Indian Constitution and in the official documents of Indian Government, the phrase 'Scheduled Castes (SC)' is used to denote the socio-economically deprived castes. Though Dalits are neither socially nor economically homogeneous, the Dalit identity brings all the sub-castes of the Dalits to a single platform as an oppressed caste, cutting across their linguistic, regional, religious, and cultural differences to challenge the existing oppressive and unjust caste system. The Arunthathiyars are considered to be the lowest caste among Dalits and looked down upon as untouchables among the untouchables, and Dalit among Dalits. Their settlements are on the outskirts of the villages. They do not have any social occasion to mingle with the other castes. They do not have any service caste of their own. According to the Census (Government of India, 2011), Scheduled Castes constitute 16.2 percent of the total population of India. The Arunthathiyars are 15.7% of total Scheduled Castes' population of Tamil Nadu.³ The Arunthathiyars, who are associated with scavenging the drains, septic latrines, sewage pits, removal of human excreta, sweeping, cleaning, leatherworks, and human and cattle corpses etc., are called by various names in different parts of India such as Bhangis, Madigas, Mathangis, Valmikis, Chamars, Olgana, Rukhi, Ramdasis, Mehtars, Balmikis, Jamadars, and Jatias. In Tamil Nadu, Arunthathiyars are known as Chakkiliyar, Pagadai, Madhari, Toti, Chemman, Madigas, Thoman, Adi Andhras and Jambavali, etc.

The community is given a common name 'Arunthathiyar' using Sanskritized myths of origin of Arunthathi, a daughter of a mythical Brahmin sage, who was born in this community and therefore they associate themselves with her name. Historically, there are different types of theories about the origin of the Arunthathiyars of Tamil Nadu. There were different groups of

³ Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Accessed on 6 January 2022 in <https://censusindia.gov.in>.

Arunthathiyars from the present Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka who had migrated into the Tamil area for various reasons. King Pratab Ruthiran (AD 1295–1322), who had Warangal as his capital, came down to Thiruchirapalli for battle and won. During that period, the Arunthathiyars who spoke Telugu might have settled in the Tamil region. In the 16th century, when the Naick kings captured some parts of the Tamil area, together with their army, there were other people who were called Kambalathars to take care of their daily needs. The Arunthathiyars were one among the nine groups of Kambalathars. These people prepared food, dress, shoes, and other materials of the army. From Mysore, King Narasimhan II (AD 1220–1238) of the Hoysala Empire invaded the Tamil region. The Arunthathiyars who spoke Kannada from the Hoysala Empire had come and settled in Tamil Nadu [Mark 2012: 25]. Some scholars say that the Arunthathiyars were brought in by the Naickar invaders of Tamil Nadu during the time of the Vijayanagara Empire [Jacob and Bandhu 2009: 34]. However, some other scholars from the Arunthathiyar community, assert that their history has been contrived and misinterpreted by mainstream historians. Ellangovan, in his book written in Tamil namely ‘Arunthathiyar: *Vinnavum Villakamum*’ (Arunthathiyar: Enquiries and Explanations) draws evidence from Sangam literature to establish the fact that Arunthathiyars had lived in Tamil Nadu during the Sangam period (BCE300~AD300). Arunthathiyars had ruled the Kuringi lands in the Sangam age in the name of Athiyar Tamizh Kudiayar. The ancient Tamil King Athiyaman belongs to the Arunthathiyar community. The region they had ruled was Kuthiraimalai or Thagadur (present-day Dharmapuri). In the Sangam age, people did not worship gods; rather, the spirits of dead kings or queens were worshipped. Accordingly, Arunthathiyars had worshipped Kottravai, who was their first ruler. Hence, Arunthathiyars argue that they were the original inhabitants or Adi Tamizhar who had lived in the Sangam age. The name Arunthathiyar means Arumai and Athiyar means “Great Athiyars” [Ellangovan 2002: 5]. Their glory had been destroyed over time and they were pushed to a peripheral status in society. Ellangovan, a scholar from Arunthathiyar community, says that their past glory has been completely erased in mainstream history [Ellangovan 2002: 28]. However, he does not give an explanation as to how the Arunthathiyar community could speak three vernacular languages of India such as Tamil, Telugu and Kannada.

The Arunthathiyars constitute one of the three major social groups among the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. Along with Pallars and Paraiyars, the Arunthathiyars form one of the largest groups among the Dalits in the state. According to the Report of Justice M.S. Janarthanam (2008) One Man Committee of Inquiry for Special Reservation for the Arunthathiyars, the term ‘Arunthathiyar’ includes also Chakkiliyar, Madari, Adi Andhra, Pagadai, Madiga and Thoti and their population of Arunthathiyar is as given below.⁴

⁴ Tamil Nadu Government Gazette, Extradordinary No. 54, Part IV–Section 1 Tamil Nadu Bills, 2009. Accessed on 8 January 2022 in <http://www.stationeryprinting.tn.gov.in/extraordinary/2009/54-Ex-IV-1-English.pdf>.

| Caste | Population | Percentage within SCs. |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| All SCs | 1,18,57,504 | 100.00% |
| Arunthathiyars | 7,71,659 | 6.51% |
| Chakkiliyars | 7,77,139 | 6.55% |
| Madaris | 2,49,494 | 2.10% |
| Adi Andhras | 40,371 | 0.34% |
| Pagadais | 13,795 | 0.12% |
| Madigas | 5,103 | 0.04% |
| Thotis | 3,896 | 0.03% |
| Total of Arunthathiyars Community | 18,61,457 | 15.70% |

Arunthathiyars are 15% of the total population of scheduled castes. They are in good numbers in almost all districts of Tamil Nadu. They are more than 90% of the total population of the Dalits in western Tamil Nadu, consisting of the districts Coimbatore, Erode, Thiruppur, Dharmapuri, Namakkal, Karur and Nilgris.

The census data of Scheduled Castes (SCs) between 1991 and 2011 shows that the literacy rate and sex ratio of Arunthathiyar community is below average (Srinivasan 2017: 6).

| Castes | 1991 | 2011 |
|---|-----------------|------------------|
| All SCs Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 978 965 39.5 | 1004 958 65.2 |
| Adi Dravida Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 975 974 36.1 | 996 951 62.8 |
| Pallan Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 994 962 41.1 | 1016 965 66.5 |
| Paraiyan Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 993 957 42.8 | 1013 961 67.4 |
| Chakkilian Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 970 949 27.5 | 999 955 55.3 |
| Arunthathiyar Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 947 944 30.8 | 990 960 58.2 |
| Madari Sex ratio 0-6 sex ratio Literacy rate | 959 988 27.3 | 1003 951 50.6 |

Compared to differences in literacy rates, the completion rates of education at different levels show greater inequality among the castes in Scheduled Castes. The literacy rate without formal education has uniformly increased for all the castes and so too the completion rate of

primary school between 1991 and 2011. Secondary school completion rate has increased for all the castes, but with some noticeable differences between castes. The table shows that, among the major castes, Chakkilian, Arunthathiyar, Madari and Kuravan have been showing lower completion rates from secondary to higher education levels than the Scheduled Castes average in both 1991 and 2011 and the data is as given below (Srinivasan 2017: 6).

| Castes | Literacy without formal education | | Primary School | | High School | | Higher Secondary | | Graduate and Above | |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|------|----------------|------|-------------|------|------------------|------|--------------------|------|
| | 1991 | 2011 | 1991 | 2011 | 1991 | 2011 | 1991 | 2011 | 1991 | 2011 |
| All SCs | 12.9 | 2.8 | 13.6 | 16.8 | 10.9 | 24.5 | 1.3 | 8.5 | 0.8 | 4.2 |
| Adi Dravidar | 12.5 | 3.0 | 14.1 | 16.1 | 12.4 | 26.2 | 1.3 | 9.0 | 0.8 | 4.5 |
| Pallan | 14.0 | 2.6 | 14.4 | 17.8 | 10.4 | 23.8 | 1.4 | 9.0 | 0.9 | 4.7 |
| Paraiyan | 14.2 | 2.5 | 15.1 | 17.8 | 11.4 | 24.9 | 1.4 | 9.0 | 0.8 | 4.2 |
| Chakkiliyan | 12.0 | 2.3 | 9.4 | 18.0 | 5.4 | 19.0 | 0.5 | 4.8 | 0.2 | 1.4 |
| Arunthadhiyar | 11.4 | 2.4 | 11.0 | 17.1 | 7.2 | 20.9 | 0.8 | 6.3 | 0.4 | 2.6 |
| Madari | 12.1 | 2.5 | 8.7 | 16.6 | 5.5 | 17.1 | 0.7 | 3.6 | 0.4 | 1.0 |

Though there are some significant improvements in the literacy rate and school education, generally, access to higher education is not equally distributed between the Scheduled Castes and non-Scheduled Castes (SCs) & Scheduled Tribes (STs). The non-SCs generally have higher literacy, education, and overall sex ratio than the SCs & STs. The lower urbanization of SCs is reflected in higher labour force participation and higher ratio of agricultural labour in the rural areas. Among the SCs, the Arunthathiyars are considered the lowest in the social hierarchy and there is disparity prevailing among the Dalit groups. The Arunthathiyars are the least educated when compared to other Dalits belonging to other subgroups. 65% of males and 80% of females among the Arunthathiyars are illiterate. 90% of them have no basic facilities in their living places. Less than 1% of the Arunthathiyars are working in Government departments. Above all, 90% of the Arunthathiyars live below the poverty line and 70% of them are suffering under the manipulation of money lenders.⁵ The Arunthathiyars are the untouchables among the other untouchables and the high castes. This reality makes the Arunthathiyars live in fear of other Dalits and in terror of the high castes: having both physical pain and mental agony as well as feeling exploited and powerless before the powerful high castes and powerful Dalits. They have to do most of the dirtiest jobs as hereditary occupations like sweeping, scavenging and removing the dead animals, tanning, making footwear and so on. Arunthathiyars feel that it is their fate to continue the dirty hereditary jobs and accept the

⁵ IC Case Study on Arunthathiyar Movement in Tamil Nadu. Accessed on 8 January 2022 in https://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/IDSN/Consultations/Cases/Arundithiyar_Movement_in_Tamil_Nadu.pdf.

victimization as untouchables among the untouchables without questioning or resisting the impunity of the high castes. Thus, the Arunthathiyar community is a victimized caste among the Dalit castes in India.

III. A Survey on the Hereditary Occupation of Arunthathiyar Community in the Jangalapuram Village

In this part of the paper, the hereditary occupation of the Arunthathiyar community in Janglapuram Village in Athurkuppam Panchayat (village council) in Triupattur District of Tamil Nadu is analyzed based on field research. Jangalapuram Village is located 16 kilometers from the city Tirupattur, the District Headquarters, and 196 kilometers from Chennai, the Capital city of Tamil Nadu, South India. In the traditional rural villages of India, the habitation of lower caste people is segregated from the residential areas of the people of higher castes. Arunthathiyar community in Janglapuram village is also located in an inconvenient place of the village segregated from the rest of the inhabitants who belong to higher castes. There are 45 families residing in the village belonging to the subcaste of Chakkiliyan. There are 35 families of this village engaged in their hereditary occupation of manufacturing winnowers made of bamboo. 45 adult men and 55 adult women are involved in the hereditary occupation of manufacturing and retailing bamboo winnowers. Though most of the children of this village are attending school, they help their parents with the winnowers making during their free time and holidays. The villagers buy the bamboo materials and make the winnowers in the courtyard of their houses. In order to make the winnowers strong and long-lasting, they are pasted with liquid made from tamarind and turmeric powder.



Making of winnowers out of bamboos



Applying turmeric and tamarind paste

Since the villagers live in adjacent houses, there is a lot of communication among themselves while working. The average monthly income per person is Rs. 4500 (60 USD). Usually, at least 2 members of the family are involved so the family income would be about Rs. 10000 (135 USD) which would be sufficient for a middle-class family in the Indian economic context.



Drying the Winnower



Winnower ready for sales

Though they have been working in this traditional trade for several decades with a decent income without many problems, the elders of the family prefer their children not to continue in it. They encourage their children to get educated and obtain white-collar jobs since the hereditary occupation is looked down upon by the people of upper castes. The hereditary occupation helped them with economic stability, but on the other hand, they are socially despised by the people of the upper castes. Besides, the Government of India also supports the education of children belonging to Scheduled Castes (lower castes) with scholarships and reservations in educational institutions. In recent years, the adults from the Arunthathiyar community extend their economic support to the children with a university education. There are a good number of first-generation university graduates from the Arunthathiyar community in the last couple of years. All the children are able to receive education at least to the primary level. There are 15 children in the higher secondary schools as well as about 15 university-graduated adults from this community. Most of the male university graduates have moved to the big cities and are employed in white-collar jobs with a good salary. Most are employed in IT companies and a few as teachers in the schools. Most of the young males of this community prefer to move out of the villages and get employment in the bigger companies in the cities since the hardships and working hours are less than the traditional job of making winnowers. Their standard of living and social status in the city are better than that of workers in the hereditary occupation. They are also able to develop friendships with colleagues in the bigger cities without any discrimination based on caste unlike in their native villages. They have more freedom and opportunities in the metropolitan cities as there is less caste consciousness among the urban residents. However, most of the female university graduates remain at home helping their parents with the hereditary occupation of winnowers. Though there is less employment availability in the vicinity of their native villages, their parents refrain from sending the female university graduates to the big cities for jobs due to safety fears. They are compelled to remain at home till their marriage. The female children and women in the Arunthathiyar community face double discrimination as lower caste and as women.

The adults engaged in white-collar jobs are economically stable, and socially respected both by the Arunthathiyar community and by the people of upper castes. On the other hand, the adults working in the hereditary occupation are looked down upon both by the Arunthathiyar

community and the people of other castes. Hence, some of the middle-aged adults without much education from the Arunthathiyar community take out large loans from the moneylenders at a high interest rate in order to get employed abroad. Most of them are in tough and menial jobs with less salary. Since they work abroad, they have recognition and respect from both the Arunthathiyar community and the people of other castes. Though their social status rises, their economic stability diminishes. Most of them work in Singapore, Malaysia, and Arab countries and return home once a year for a few days of vacation.

The adults aged 50 and above are involved in the hereditary occupation in the village. Though they are socially despised by the people of upper castes, they do not journey out of their village since they lack the knowledge of other jobs. They are also compelled to stay in their native village continuing the traditional trade in order to care for their elderly parents at home. The women of Arunthathiyar community help their husbands in the making of winnowers and at the same time perform household chores. Besides, winnower-making demands more than one person. Once they make a good number of winnowers, they take them around neighboring villages by bicycle and sell them. Though there are many households involved in winnower-making, they have not established an association for themselves to address the different issues involved in their profession. Each household is independent with regard to the business of winnower-making and selling. The members from this community say that the Government does not help them much with their traditional occupation as it is not recognized as big business. However, there is an NGO, which is active in the vicinity of this village, namely ICDP (Integrated Community Development Project), which extends economic and professional support to continue the hereditary occupation of the Arunthathiyar community. The NGO helps the women of this community as a guarantor for loans from the national banks to continue their traditional manufacturing. The NGO also gives ideas and advice about marketing of the products of Arunthathiyar community. It assisted them to form Self Help Groups (SHG) to save their income in the bank and lend money to the members of the Arunthathiyar community at less interest.



The Director and the team of NGO



Skill Training of NGO in the Community

The NGO also organizes skill training programs for the Arunthathiyar community to improve their traditional practices to reach a good standard. It also gives special attention to

educating school dropout children of the Arunthathiyar community with free evening lessons on the premises of the NGO. There are also various programs for the wholistic growth of the children of this community with sports and literary competitions. It also guides the adults with self-employment projects. There are special programs for festivals and notable national celebrations such as Independence Day and Republic Day of India and so on. The NGO also takes a lot of initiatives in introducing the various schemes of the Government for the social and economic welfare of the Arunthathiyar community.

To summarize, there are two reasons, social and economic, to abandon hereditary occupations. The social reason is that the hereditary occupation is considered to be low in social status both among the Arunthathiyar community and the people from other caste communities. White-collar jobs are appreciated and acclaimed by the members of the community and others. The rural village is inconvenient with less infrastructure and few opportunities for growth in comparison with bigger cities, not to mention having more caste consciousness and discrimination. The economic reason is the lack of support from Government for the hereditary occupation as it is not recognized as a big industrial profession, though there is great support from an NGO located in their vicinity. Though a white-collar job involves much work pressure, it is not as hard as the traditional occupation which involves manual labor. Some of the elders of the community strongly feel that though it has been their *Kula Thozhil* (hereditary occupation) for ages, they wish their children to persevere in socially recognized white-collar jobs than continue in the socially despised, though more profitable, traditional occupation. On the other hand, some others think that their hereditary occupation, a part of their identity for ages, should be continued with an infusion of modern technology and art. Thus, there is a dichotomy between two types of people among the members of Arunthathiyar community whether to keep up the identity of the Arunthathiyar community by continuing the hereditary occupation or to turn to the white-collar jobs with the view of gaining social recognition.

Conclusion

The caste-based hereditary occupation has gone through different phases influenced by the socio-economic-political situations of Indian history. Religious interpretation rationalized and legitimized the hierarchical hereditary occupations, segregating them into high and low status as well as pure and profane. The degree of purity is determined by the caste performing the hereditary job. As for status, the priestly caste occupies the top, the rest being lower and duty-bound to serve the upper caste. As hereditary occupations increased, the people engaged in the same occupation became a group with the same identity and affinity forming different *Jatis* (castes). Each *jati* is composed of a group deriving its livelihood primarily from a specific occupation. Later, the hereditary occupation as an economic structure was very much practiced known as the *jajmani* system in the Indian villages. The *jajmani* system is considered to be a food-providing unit, where each caste had a specified occupation and supported each other. However, in modern times, there are no stringent rules demanding the

continuation of the hereditary occupation; yet, they continue in the rural villages of India. Some of the jobs are still considered to be impure and the workers are discriminated against in society, though the freedom of choice in occupation exists on paper. In modern India, the Government has various preferential policies for the people from lower castes (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) working in so-called polluted hereditary occupations so that they can have more opportunities to secure government jobs.

Among the lower caste people (Scheduled Castes), the Arunthathiyar Community is considered to be the lowest caste in the social hierarchy and their hereditary occupation is considered to be the most polluted. They have to do most of the dirtiest jobs as hereditary occupations like sweeping, scavenging, removing dead animals, tanning, making footwear, and so on. Arunthathiyars feel that it is their fate to continue the dirty hereditary jobs and accept the victimization as untouchables among the untouchables without questioning or resisting the treatment by the higher castes. The Arunthathiyar community has different types of hereditary occupations depending on the geographical area in which they reside. The Arunthathiyar community in Janglapuram village in Tirupattur District, Tamil Nadu, had 'bamboo winnowing manufacturer' as their hereditary occupation and their identity for many years. In recent years, only the elders of the community continue the making of winnowers. Most of the younger generations are disinterested in continuing their hereditary occupation for social and economic reasons. The social reason is the low status accompanying the hereditary occupation both among the Arunthathiyar community and the people from other caste communities. White-collar professions are appreciated and acclaimed by the members of the community and others. Besides, there is higher caste consciousness and discrimination in the rural villages than in the bigger cities. The economic reason is Government support for opportunities and the inconvenience and lack of infrastructure in rural areas leading to stunted economic growth. Some of the elders of the community strongly feel that though it is their *Kula Thozhil* (hereditary occupation) for ages, they wish their children to persevere in socially recognized white-collar jobs than continuing the socially despised, but more profitable, traditional occupation. On the other hand, some others think that their hereditary occupation, which gave them their identity for ages, should be continued with innovation from modern technology and art. Thus, there is a dichotomy of thinking between two types of people among the members of Arunthathiyar community, whether to keep up the identity of the Arunthathiyar community by continuing the hereditary occupation or to take up the white-collar jobs with the view of increasing social recognition.

Acknowledgment

This research is done with the support of Nanzan University Pache Research Subsidy I-A-2 for the 2021 academic year and 2021 Special Research Grant (2021 年度特別配分研究費).

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