

**STATUS OF THE PARAIYARS UNDER MIRASDARS IN THE MADRAS
PRESIDENCY
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ABSTRACT

The Paraiyar belonged to the Dalit community and were considered one of the lowest castes in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. As a result, they faced social discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation. Their marginalised status made them vulnerable to economic exploitation and social oppression by the Mirasdars and upper-caste communities. The status of the Paraiyars under the Mirasdars in the Madras Presidency was marked by economic exploitation, social discrimination, and a hierarchical caste system. However, with the efforts of social reformers and the implementation of progressive policies, there were gradual improvements in the living conditions and rights of the Paraiyars, although challenges and disparities persisted for a long time.

This paper explores the socio-economic status of the Paraiyars within the framework of the Mirasdar system in the Madras presidency during the colonial era. It investigates the rights, challenges, and overall experience of Paraiyars under the dominance of Mirasdars, shedding light on the entrenched inequalities and injustices perpetuated by the caste system.

KEYWORDS: Paraiyars, Mirasdars, Madras Presidency, Caste System, Socio-Economic status, oppression

INTRODUCTION

The status of the Paraiyars among the Mirasdars in the colonial Madras Presidency is a complex issue that requires a thorough understanding of historical records and academic research. During the British Rule, the Madras Presidency (including present-day states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and parts of Kerala) was run by a landlord system known as the zamindari system. Under this system, land was owned by zamindars, or landlords, who collected income from tenants and other farmers.

The Paraiyans, also known as the Pariah's or Pariah were one of the oppressed communities in the caste hierarchy of South India. They were often relegated to menial, low-level jobs such as cleaners, leather workers, and drummers. In the agricultural economy of the Madras Presidency, many Paraiyars worked as agricultural laborers on Mirasdar lands. The Mirasdars were intermediate landowners who owned vast tracts of land under the Zamindars. They had great power and authority over the peasants and laborers who worked on their land. The relationship between the Mirasdars and the Paraiyars was one of exploitation, oppression, and social discrimination.

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this study is to understand status of the Paraiyars from an economic and social point of view under Mirasdars in the Madras Presidency. The study is descriptive in nature and is based on the secondary data analysis. Various published sources, including those from the scholars like Baly, Dirks, Jaffrelot Christophe, Srinivas M.N., Raj Shekar Basu, were used extensively in the study to gather the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review serves as a critical component in any scholarly endeavor, providing a foundation for understanding existing research, identifying gaps, and shaping the context for new investigations. In the exploration of the status of the Paraiyars under Mirasdars in the Madras Presidency, an exhaustive review of relevant literature becomes paramount. The caste system was oppressive and had a negative effect on the Marginalised Communities such as the Paraiyars. The socio-economic situation, rights and challenges of the Paraiyars under Mirasdari system have been documented by scholars which provides valuable information on the history of caste discrimination in colonial India.

MIRASDAR SYSTEM

The system of Mirasdari land tenure, which was introduced during the British rule, Perpetuated the power dynamics which favoured the upper castes, while marginalizing and exploring the underprivileged castes, including Paraiyars¹. The Mirasdari land lords, who were mostly upper castes, exercised considerable influence over land tenure agriculture production and socio-political control². Paraiyars, who were classified as Dalits or 'Untouchables' faced severe discrimination and economic hardship.

The British divided the agrarian villages into three categories for administrative convenience. Landlord, Tenant Cultivator, Labourer. The system of keeping the entire land in the village under his control and dividing it among tenants and laborers is called the Mirasu system. In this system, the peasants were forced to work under many conditions, for example, the family had to pay a small amount to the laborers and sign the loan deed, and the family had to work on the land. Perhaps if the head of the family died his heirs would have to work until the debt was cleared and anyone who violated this condition was severely punished by the courts.³ Out of 90 million acres of farming land area in the Madras Presidency, 27.5(30%) million acres were held by 849 Zamindars.⁴

Even though the colonial government abolished slavery in 1843, the Paraiya people continued to live as indentured servants to their masters. Until the middle of the 19th century, the British authorities maintained a policy of non-interference in matters of culture, tradition, and religion.⁵

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF THE PARAIYARS

The socio-economic situation of the Paraiyars under the Mirasdars was one of poverty, landlessness, and lack of access to education and health care.⁶ The Paraiyars were frequently forced to work as Farmers on the Mirasdari owned land, earning low wages and working in exploitative conditions. The fact that Paraiyars did not own land contributed to their economic vulnerability as they were not able to accumulate wealth and move up the social ladder.

During the colonial era in India, particularly in the Madras Presidency, the Paraiyars, also known as the Pariahs or Adi Dravidars, were a Dalit community that faced significant social and economic challenges. The Madras Presidency, which encompassed large parts of present-day Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, was under British rule from the 17th century until India's independence in 1947.

Under the Mirasdars (landlords or landowners), the Paraiyars and other lower-caste communities experienced systemic oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. The Mirasdars were often from higher castes and held significant social and economic power. They controlled land and resources, giving them considerable influence over the lives of the lower-caste communities

When slavery was introduced and later abolished, serfs continued to work under their old masters. Their descendants are still doing the same work under the name of 'Padiyal'. Such laborers are selected from the poor caste who are struggling to settle debts of ten or fifteen rupees or for the marriage expenses of their brothers or children. There is only one way to retire from a master. If that is the case, he must find another master who will come forward to settle his debt. If other methods are found to be used, the Paraiyars will be prosecuted in the Village Court or the Taluk Court and the provisions of the Breach of Contract Act will be enforced. The colonial rule only continued the abolition of serfdom. The reason was that the British were jealous and thought it would affect the revenue from the landlords.⁷

The government had no interest in protecting the interest of cultivating tenants in Ryotwari areas. In a government report, the condition of the Paraiyars is described thus; for generations, we had borne the Crushing and ever-growing burden of rents, illegal exaction, and a variety of cases. He used to be beaten and ejected from his land and his mud Huts. For generations he toiled on land in the hot season and cold, night and day, like a beast of burden, only to be deprived of his produce when the harvest was ready. he got utterly miserable, he developed a haunted and helpless Look and became fatalist, utterly Resigned to his fate.⁸

In the case of agricultural laborers, their social and economic disadvantage was reinforced by the caste structure. The dominant castes in the villages did not want those below them who were tenant farmers and serfs to become landowners. They felt that if it changed, their power and hold on the village would be weakened.⁹

Documents from 1820 show that 'untouchable' agricultural laborers who were farmsteads tried to obtain patta rights. However, the dominant castes put various hurdles to prevent them from getting land. Later these protests weakened and the Paraiyar community became 12 percent of the landowners in South Arcot.¹⁰

The Chengalpattu collector pointed out that the miscreants stormed into the slums and threatened to drive away the villagers who had gathered there. The Mirasdars said that the places where the Paraiyars lived belonged to them. The ruler was also reluctant to take action against the miscreants and the government was also reluctant.¹¹

The collectors of Thanjavur, Nellai opined that the applications for Gramanatham lands should be sent only to the Mirasdars, who have the first right. The British government passed a law to allow 'low caste' people to acquire land,

but the Mirasdars refused to agree. So, the 'untouchable peasants' had almost no chance of getting land. British officials like Mullally opined that although the colonial administration made several efforts to free the 'low castes' from the clutches of the Mirasdars, no progress was made in the villages. 1891 October 1 The Hindu newspaper published the following article under the heading 'Paraiyar Disabilities'. The present position of the law allows the action of the Mirasdar to exclude the Paraiyar from the grant of lands.

In the early 1890s, the colonial authorities of Madras introduced some reform measures for the betterment of the oppressed communities. However, the government did not encourage activities that would destroy the old social or economic structure. For example, the government did not support policy changes that would interfere with agrarian relations that were dominated by feudal lords and landlords.¹²

In 1882, the government set up the Education Commission, which conducted an inquiry into the socio-economic conditions of the 'Panchamar' people, and stated that their backwardness was due to systematic social exclusion and extreme poverty.

An ordinance issued in 1892 called for the allotment of wastelands to the Panchamars. Meanwhile, the government adopted a dual approach. The government, which did not come forward to completely abolish the Mirasu system, directed the authorities to take up grievance redressal measures so that Panchamar benefits could be obtained.

In 1902, the government mandated District Collectors to give priority to "Darkest" (petition) petitions by members of "untouchable" communities. It was difficult for the government to acquire plots for residential plots and distribute them to the landless vulnerable families due to the resistance of the squatters. To solve this problem, the government gave the barren lands to the missionaries free of charge. They were advised to build educational institutions on that land and use it for the development of Panchamar.¹³

The Board of Revenue considered that waste lands should be earmarked for distribution to marginalized communities. But the miscreants resisted. They claimed that they had rights over those lands since ancient times. In the villages, they claimed to have the privilege of 'Kariadu'. (Kariadu' is like the village of Pasangeri where the land is temporarily cultivated by tenants under contract.) By this, it is clear that the mirasdars did not want to let the dwelling places out of their control.¹⁴

The Government is not willing to change its position regarding the landed communities in the Madras Presidency. The government does not want any change in the landlord-labour relationship. George Paddison, the Madras Government Labor Commissioner, admitted in the 1920s before the British Government's Royal Commission on Agriculture in India that it was not the government's intention to convert the landless marginalized communities into independent farmers who owned their land.

The lands allotted to them were very small. So, they could not free themselves from the condition of being bound to the dominant societies. In other words, the caste Hindu landowners, who did not want their labor supply to diminish, thought that a small amount of land would be sufficient for the Panchamars to be self-reliant in times of crisis.¹⁵

RIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

Paraiyars faced nominal legal protection, but they were unable to fight for their rights and contest the oppressive practices of Mirasdars due to discriminatory social practices and institutionalized caste discrimination. Poor land reforms and unequal distribution of resources further marginalised the Paraiyar people, creating cycle of poverty and exclusion¹⁶

Efforts towards social reform and equality began to gain momentum during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as social reformers and political leaders advocated for the rights of Dalit communities. Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar played a significant role in fighting against caste-based discrimination and advocating for the rights of marginalized communities, including the Paraiyars.

It's important to note that the situation improved gradually over time due to various social and political movements, legal reforms, and efforts to promote social justice. However, caste-based discrimination and the legacy of these oppressive conditions continue to have an impact on many communities in India even today.

The status of the Paraiyars was marked by extreme poverty, lack of education, limited access to healthcare, and overall socio-economic disadvantage. Their position in society was reinforced by religious and social norms that justified their subordination. The British colonial administration, despite certain social reforms and attempts to alleviate the situation of Dalits, did not significantly alter the deeply ingrained social hierarchies and discrimination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mirasdari system was based on the supremacy of landlords belonging to the upper castes, called Mirasdars. Mirasdars had extensive control over land ownership and agriculture production. Paraiyars, on the other hand, faced service caste discrimination and economic hardship. They were often to work as agricultural labour on lands owned by Mirasdars under exploitative conditions and at low wages.

CONCLUSION

The fact that Paraiyars are marginalised under Mirasdars system in Madras Presidency is a reflection of the inequalities and injustices that colonial caste system created. The Mirasdari caste system has been abolished and affirmative action policies have been implemented in independent India, but, the legacy of caste oppression continues to affect the socio-economic situation of the region. To overcome the systematic marginalisation of the Paraiyars, Comprehensive land reforms social empowerment programs and concerted efforts to eliminate caste-based discrimination are necessary.

¹ Baly, Susan, *Caste Society and Politics in India*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.128

² Dirks, Nicholas B. *Caste of Mind colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, 2001, P.92

³ A. K. Kalimuthu, *Thamizhagathil Kalaniyamum Velankudikalum Oru Samuga Poruliyal Paarvai, 1801- 1947*, Barathi Puthagalayam, Chennai, 2020, P.201

⁴ K. A. Manikumar, *Impact of British Colonialism on Difference Social classes of Nineteenth Century Madras Presidency*, *Social Scientist*, Vol.42, No56, (May- June 2014) P.22

⁵ Raj Sekhar Basu, (in Tamil A. Kumaran), *Nandanin Pillaigal Paraiyar Varalaru 1850-1956*, Kizhakku Pathipagam, Chennai, 2016, P. 118.

⁶ Srinivas M.N. *Social Changes in modern India*, University of California Press, 1962, P.76

⁷ Tremenheere, (Ed. V. Alex, in Tamil A. Sundaram), *Panchami Nila Urimai Chengalpattu Parayarina Makkalai Partiya Kurippugal*, Ezhuthu Pathipagam, Pasumalai Madurai, 2009, P.36

⁸ K. A. Manikumar, *Impact of British Colonialism on Difference Social classes of Nineteenth Century Madras Presidency*, *Social Scientist*, Vol.42, No56, (May- June 2014) P.28

⁹ Raj Sekhar Basu, (in Tamil A. Kumaran), *Nandanin Pillaigal Paraiyar Varalaru 1850-1956*, Kizhakku Pathipagam, Chennai, 2016, P. 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, P. 114

¹¹ *Ibid*, P. 123

¹² *Ibid*, P. 237

¹³ *Ibid*, PP. 266-267

¹⁴ *Ibid*, P.269.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, PP. 270-271

¹⁶ Jaffrelot, Christophe, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability; Analysing and Fighting Caste*. Hurst Publishers, 2005, P.110