

How the practice manual scavenging came to Tamil Nadu



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The remarks made by Seeman, coordinator of Naam Thamizhar Katchi, during the campaign in the recent Erode East by-election, about the manual scavenging vis-à-vis Arundhatiyars, sparked a controversy on the social media. Even a police case has been registered against him.

The controversy has triggered a discussion on the questions when the practice of scavengers scooping out human waste started as part of sanitation work and why a particular community alone is involved in this work.

Information given by evidences

During the times of monarchy and zamindari system, palaces used to be located separately or in the heart of the villages or towns. Streets were segregated on the basis of caste in the hierarchical order of patti, oor, cheri, pattinam and town. There are evidences which say that the Scheduled Caste people used to live in the north and in some regions in the west.

Datasets are not available about the sanitation workers who used to be engaged in work during the temple festivals which were

virtually annual markets where men assembled in large numbers. But lots of information are available about the clusters of people involved in cleaning work at temples.

Proofs are there which show how the farm laborers were sold off along with agricultural lands. This system could be called sale of slaves, say Prof. Kalimuthu and A. Sivasubramanian. But they have not mentioned anything about evidences for sanitation and poop cleaning.

There is a Tamil proverb which means to the effect that when it rains, the smell of dried faeces wafts. I was discussing this proverb with Prof. Tho. Paramasivan who said, "There was no separate practice of scooping out human excrement in the tropical region. There was an expression in Tamil 'pee mandhai' (ground for defecation) which women folks from the palace used. There are no evidences to prove that scavengers were appointed to clear poops. This was a complex situation created by the British who made the scavengers remove the dried human waste so that it was used as manure for manufacture of sugarcane grown for the sugar factories. This practice brought in to fulfil a necessity continued till 1975 even after the British rule ended. But no great researches have been done on this subject."

Punishment work

Prof. Meena Radhakrishnan of the Delhi Jawaharlal Nehru University. in her book 'Dishonoured by History: 'Criminal Tribes' and British Colonial Policy, 2010,' says that during the British rule, salt traders were affected by the salt sales tax and fees to be paid for getting licence for salt sales. "The Criminal Tribes Act introduced in North India way back in 1871 came into effect all over the country in 1911-14. The people of the communities and tribes branded as criminals were herded into dungeon-like ghettos. If anyone of them was found indulging in theft over five times, they were forced to clean the toilets in the ghettos by way of punishment for their crime. It is these penalized people who were re-deployed for the work of cleaning toilets which had been

constructed only in the first-class train compartment,” she says in the book.

The East India Company banned the justice department and armies of the ‘palayapattus’ in 1801 and enacted the Explosive Arms Prohibition Act. It was the people of the Arundhatiyar, Kuravar, Piramalai Kallar and Valayar communities, who were employed for manufacturing explosives in the ‘palayalappattu’ battalions. The evidence for this can be found in a field survey on these people of the said communities who still enjoy their exclusive right to explode ‘bombs’ at the fireworks as part of temple festivals in Kongu zone and Madurai region.

On the basis of Manu dharma

As the 1801 law prohibited employment of soldiers for bursting explosives in the palayapattus, the British rule re-deployed these soldiers for sanitation work in municipalities and for removing human excrement in the army housing quarters, railway quarters and tea estates. However, not all people of the criminalized tribes were brought into the sanitation work.

The livelihood that changed

W.J.Hatch, a priest, who conducted a research staying for several years with the people of a particular community, released a report in 1896, which was later published as a book titled ‘The Land Pirates of India’. Hatch in the book said, “The salt traders, who lost their livelihood in a crisis triggered by the salt law, were forced by poverty into theft. Besides, the people, who used to scratch a living, selling salt, ginger and curry leaves, weaving baskets and brewing liquor for the kings and their soldiers, gave up on their trades and turned into highway robbers.”

Papua Naidu, who was the police chief in the Madras Presidency in 1904, in his report called the people of a particular community railway thieves. The report was later published as a book ‘The History of Railway Thieves: With Hints on Detection.’

So, it is a history that during the British reign, some communities were permitted to do trade and commerce. But the people of the mercantile and warrior communities were pushed into an abysmal situation wherein they were forced to remove human excrement by hands.

Translated by V.Mariappan