

THE RECLAMATION OF CRIMINAL TRIBES IN TAMILNADU WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KORAVAS

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Abstract

One of the outstanding features of British administration in India was the Reclamation of the criminal tribes.¹ The Reformatory measures taken by the British administration through Criminal Tribes Act was the establishment of Reclamation to the Criminal Tribes or Denotified Tribes. The British Government wanted to change the character and outlook of the Criminal Tribes in general for elevating their status on par with other people.² The introduction of reclamation scheme for the Koravars formed the major initiative of the administration for effecting social mobility and fraternity. The Reclamation for koravars emphasized the need to make the korava criminals thoroughly unpopular with the members of their own community, to provide them with an alternative occupation, so as to make them economically independent of crime and at the same time to divert the energies of the younger generation devoid of their parental habits.³

Keywords: *Denotified, Criminal, koravars, Kallars, Yenadis, Agambadyas, Valayars*

The Criminal Tribes in Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, Koravars, Kallars, Yenadis, Agambadyas, Valayars, etc., were registered as Criminal Tribes by the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and the Act was extended to the state in the year 1911 and it was implemented in the state in 1914.

In the Census Report of 1891, Mr. J.A. Bains, the Commission of Census classified the castes on the basis of the traditional occupations namely as “Forest Tribes”, Animists, etc. They lived with their hereditary nature, illiteracy, poverty and slavery. At that time legal protection was not totally given to these communities. The economic condition of these people were mainly based on the hereditary occupations like salt trade, basket making, kaval work under local chieftains.⁵

The Salt pan workers were called as Uppilians or Koravars, Korachas, Yerukalas and Kaikadees. They were mostly living in Vellore, North Arcot, south Arcot, Tirunelveli and Ranmnad.⁶ The Koravars lived by making baskets and fortune telling and they spoke corrupt Tamil. Their economic and social conditions were deplorable. In fact, the economic backwardness and crude nature influenced these individuals and clans to indulge in criminal activities.

The original home of the Koravas was the southern parts of Madras Presidency. They carried salt and grains from the coastal towns to interior places. Till the advent of the Railways they were engaged in the salt trade. After the collapse of their profession they

lost their income. The introduction of Railways completely affected their livelihood. So they took themselves to the criminal activities. They indulged in criminal offences like burglaries, robberies, dacoities and other grave offences. They were once employed for transport purposes by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan. They mostly lived in Salem, Coimbatore, South Arcot and Tanjore.⁷

They were classified on the basis of their profession or occupation. They were classified as Uppu Koravars, Karuvepalai Koravars, Koodai Katti Koravars, Kavalkar Koravars, Pachai Kuthi Gadde Koravers, Kallu Koravars (Wodders) and Kootkaikarees (Pick pocketers). These people indulging in criminal activities like house breaking, robbery, dacoity, cheating, pick pockets, thefts, etc. irrespective of age ranging from 6 to 70 years old.⁸ During the British rule these tribes were made to bear the brunt of criminality by the accident of their birth and were subjected to restraints and their movements. So harsh that even an accidental failure to report to their respective police station at unearthly hours treated as offence justifying the imposition of a savage sentence of imprisonment with a single stroke. The British authorities, through the enactment of Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, branded the whole castes and tribes as "Criminals". In fact, it may be said that a much lower percentage of these tribes have led to criminality by giving them the stigma of Criminal Tribes.

During the 1860's the rate of Criminal offences increased by oppressive rules of the British. In the same year more than 8342 person were involved in the Criminal activities. With the aim of systematizing the Police Force in the year 1881 the Criminal Investigation Department was started. The Madurai District itself classified into rural and urban Madurai by the District Superintendent of Police, Madurai for the purpose of minimizing the crime rate in the Madurai District. In Madurai most of the offenders were Kallars and Koravars.⁹ To keep a check over the activities of criminals, the Criminal Tribes Act was passed in the year 1871 in the Centre. To register Criminal cases the Government of India introduced Amendment of Criminal Act of 1871. Then, by the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Amendment of Criminal Act of 1897, the local Governments were also empowered to separate children between the ages of 8 and 18 from the Reformatory Settlements. In 1909 a Cattle Branding System was introduced in Madurai by means of which each owner of the cattles could have his animals identified by particular letters and numbers.¹⁰ This system was also not able to check the Koravars worked as a Kavalkars and got toppu cooly or kaval fees. Under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911 the local Government was empowered to declare a tribe to be a criminal tribe without any arrangement for their settlement or provisions for the livelihood. Under this act respective tribe should be registered as Criminal Tribes. Then they were settled in special Reformatory Settlements made for them.

The independent living nature of the people and destruction of their hereditary occupation of Kallars and Koravars, the oppressive legal treatment of the British Police administration introduction a system by which these criminal tribes whereto register their

name in the police records. They were registering irrespectively all the people belong to that race and this kind of attitude kindled the mind of the criminals. Consequently, the number of crimes registered in Tamil Nadu was gradually increased.¹¹

On this basis, the Indian Jails Committee was appointed in 1919. This Act empowered the local government to make arrangement for their settlement, Reclamation and Training. This act also gave provision to effective protection, proper treatment of tribes in the matters of wates, etc. Under the circumstances the authorities began to realize that the Reclamation was the only solution for the reduction of crimes.¹²

At that time the recommendation made by the District Superintendent of Police, Madurai, Mr. Loveluck a draft was forwarded for the Reclamation of these Criminal Tribes to the Government in the year 1920. Thus in 1920 the introduction of he Koravars Reclamation was made. This aimed to provide them with alternative occupation so as to render them economically independent and to divert the energies of the younger generation to peaceful pursuits by these schemes like starting Koravar Schools, Boarding Homes and Reclamation Settlement for habitual offenders and non-offender.

The Reclamation work was originally administered by the Police Department. Then the responsibility was transferred to Commissioner of Labour and Rural Upliftments. This same was continued till 1944. In the year 1948 the Reclamation work was again transferred from Police Department to the Commissioner of Labour. After that Criminal Tribes Act was abolished in 1948-14 Reclamation work was entrusted from the year 1949 to the Harijan Welfare Department. The Backward Class Commission was appointed in 1953. It recommended that such Criminal Tribes should be termed as Denotified Communities.

Reclamation Scheme for Koravars

Koravar Reclamation Scheme was established along with the Kallar Reclamation Scheme in 1920 itself. During 1920-1939, it was under the supervision of the Tahsildar of Tiruchengodu and from 1939 - 1952, it was under the control of the District superintendent of Police, Salem.¹⁵ Again from 1952, the District Welfare Officer, Salem was in charge of the Reclamation. He worked under the control of the Collector of Salem district.¹⁶ The working of the Koravar Reclamation was mostly restricted to Salem district. The works of the Reclamation during 1920 consisted of the following activities:

- (i) Maintenance of the Koravar Reclamation schools in Salem district
- (ii) Award of boarding grants to Koravars, and
- (iii) Maintenance of the Koravar boys and girls boarding home.¹⁷

The Government of Madras established five elementary schools at Madathur, Gopalapuram, Manivilandan, Kalyanagri and Kallanathan in Tiruchengodu Taluk. Madathur Elementary School was under the supervision of the Tahsildar of Tiruchengodu and the remaining four under the London Mission, Attur.¹⁸ All the five shools were inspected by the

educational authorities annually. The school at Gopalapuram was temporarily closed in 1938 due to insufficient strength and was permanently closed in 1939 and its recognition withdrawn. The remaining four schools functioned with children of Koravars from various villages being brought to the school.¹⁹ Adult Education centre for Koravars was initially started in Swamiapuram in 1952. About 25 Korava adults were made literate. The Headmaster of Kallar Reclamation School, Swamiapuram was in charge of the night school. The Korava adults were given moral instruction and were made literate at the Adult Education Centre. The younger generation of the Koravars were given free education, food and clothing. They were given facilities to acquire good habits, education and better training. They were expected to become peaceful citizen in future.

Two Koravar Boarding Homes at Attur were established during 1932 to provide boarding facilities to the Koravar boys and girls. One warden and a matron were employed for the supervision of the inmates of the boarding home. The boarders were given Kanji (gruel) in the mornings and rice, sambar, rasam and butter milk at noon and idely, thosai or other tiffin at night.²⁰ During 1937 agricultural farm was attached to Koravar Boys Boarding at Attur. All the boys had taken due share in gardening. The senior boys had in addition done regular field work on the farm in the cool hours of the day, morning and evening.²¹ One of the boys who had taken his teachers training in the higher grade worked as teacher. Five were working as untrained teachers, preparatory to joining the training school. Two had joined the police. One was employed in the Railway. Three were working on their own lands as farmers. During 1937 there were forty eight boys and the Government sanctioned a boarding grant of Rs. 7-8-0 per day per mensem. A grant of Rs. 360 was also sanctioned towards the maintenance of the agricultural farm for Koravars at Attur.²²

Since 1950, the Government of Tamilnadu insited more duties to the Koravar Reclamation including.

- (i) Maintenance of Adult Education Centres;
- (ii) Construction of houses for Korsvars
- (iii) Sinking of drinking water wells and irrigation wells
- (iv) Supply of bulls and agricultural implements to Koravars
- (v) Provision of moral instruction to Koravars and
- (vi) Maintenance of agricultural farm.²³

Koravars were trained on the line of agriculture also. While agriculture was not their hereditary occupation, the method of cultivation was given training during the Korava boys who had stayed in the boarding home at Attur. After they left from the boarding home, he was given a pair of bulls in 1956-57. Forty-four pair of bulls were distributed at a cost of Rs. 8,800. In addition to these, agricultural implements were also given to them. Since 1956 - 1966 nearlyeleven irrigation wells were sunk in Salem and Attur taluks.²⁴ Time to time training programmes were organised to refresh the cultivation method. After the

introduction of agriculture among the Koravars, they started to settle in one place and their way of life style had changed from roaming to settled life to some extent.

In addition to agricultural experience, cottage industries were introduced among the Koravars, when the Koravars did not have sufficient skill in any particular field of cottage industries. After independence, during 1956 onwards the Government of Tamilnadu gave training on basket making. Due to these programmes hundreds of Koravar families were benefitted. The Koravar girls in the boarding home at Attur were also given training on basket making. The Reclamation of Koravar in a honorable way²⁵ After the Koravars took the occupation of agriculture and cottage industries, it necessitated them to settle in one place. They were in need of permanent houses. After realizing the necessity of the Koravars Government introduced the housing scheme for the Koravars in 1970. The Government built the houses according to the number of families.²⁶ After the settled life, the Government took initiative in public health. Thereby drinking water wells were dug in the areas of Koravar population. It cannot be denied that the Koravar Reclamation played an important role in the settled life of the Koravars.²⁷ The reclamation work initiated by the Government touched each and every family of the criminal tribes. It left lasting impacts upon the traditionally haunted people who did not visualize for any change in their life style. The school education, when it reached to the doorsteps of these lethargic social groups, worked as a boon to change the outlook and pattern of life.²⁸ Mostly settled in villages and being away from the innovative urban life, the rudiments of a modern social system reached the country side through the schemes of reclamation. In addition to the government step of Criminal Tribes Settlement and Reclamation, missionaries played an important role for social change among the denotified communities.

End Notes

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