

ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE UPLIFTMENT OF DEPRESSED CLASSES IN TAMILNADU**Dr. R. Sathiyabama & Dr. N. Neela***Associate Professor, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women (A), Madurai-2***Abstract**

In this paper after 1947 initiatives taken by the women leaders, T.S. Soundaram, Maniammai, Satyavanimuthu and Veerammal for the emancipation and the upliftment of the depressed classes through education have been dealt with. In the process of emancipation, the works of various movements, women organizations and women leaders are highlighted. The women leaders' fighting for attaining a new status to the depressed class and the consequent discussions in the legislature and conflicts with the caste Hindus have also been discussed. The measures of the Government are also explained.

Keywords: *depressed classes, Manu Sastras, Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras*

The Indian Hindu society is well known for its caste system. On the basis of Manu Sastras, the whole structure of the Hindu society has been broadly divided into four major categories called Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. While the people of the first three categories were able to enjoy the social privileges and the benefits, the fourth category was deprived of everything. These people were also treated as untouchables and they simply eked out their lives in an inexplicit social agony. The coming of the Europeans and subsequently the English education created a new kind of social awakening among the educated folks of the Hindu society. The emergence of socio-religious reformers in the 18th and 19th centuries caused for the introduction of many legislations to wipe out the age long social evils such as the practice of Sati, Child Marriage, etc. While these legislations had a little impact on the people at higher level, the socio-economic condition of the Sudras, otherwise called untouchables and depressed classes were more or less remained unchanged.

The depressed classes or the untouchables were economically weak and also were denied of certain social and religious rights. They were not allowed to take water from common wells, to enter into temples, to use the roads and to get equal opportunities for admissions into schools and public institutions. Gandhi held that the practice of untouchability was a blot on Hinduism and asked the people to remove it from the Hindu society. However no appreciable program was made in this regard until the establishment of the All India Anti-untouchability League in 1932 in Delhi.

The Tamilnadu Servants Untouchable Society

The name of the 'Anti-untouchability League' was changed into 'Servants of Untouchable Society'. The 'Tamilnadu Servants Untouchable Society' was formed on 20

Nov.1932. T.S. Soundaram became the member of this organization. Along with T.S. Soundaram other women volunteers namely S. Thayammal, R. Lakshmikantham, V. Akilandeswari, N.M.R.S. Parvathavardhini, M.K.S. Parvathavardhini, N. Lakshmi Bharathi, Dr. PitchaimuthuAmmalandMeenakshiAmmal became the members of the organization. S. SomasundaraBharathi, one of the celebrated Gandhian leaders who actively participated in the abolition of untouchability program, became one of the 12 members who constituted the provincial Board of the Tamilnadu Servants Untouchable Society. He was the president of the society in Madurai District. Along with him T.S.S. led anti-untouchability campaign and addressed number of crowded gatherings there.

As far as Tamilnadu is concerned, Dr. Soundaram and number of HarijanSevaks did yeoman service for the removal of untouchability particularly in Madurai. She became the member of the Hindu Women's Association which was founded in Madurai and her mother Lakshmi Ammal was its President. The association did extremely useful work for the upliftment of the Harijans. On the encouragement of Lakshmi Ammal, Dr. T.S. Soundaram worked vigorously. T.S.S. Rajan, a wealthy brahmin from Trichirappalli was nominated as the President of TamilnaduHarijanSevakSangh. He served for 3 years and formed its branches in all the districts. A. Vaithianathalyer, a veteran HarijanSevak became its President in 1935. Likewise a number of versatile and Gandhian stalwarts like Dr. T.S. Soundaram, N.N.M.R. Subbaramana of Madurai, SardarVedarathnamPillai of Vedaranyam, T.S. Avinashilingam of Coimbatore, Bashyamlyengar of Madras and many more took in-charge of the works for upliftment of the scheduled castes.

Anti-Untouchability Campaign

Dr. T.S. Soundaram did a lot to ameliorate the living condition of the Harijans. She addressed a number of crowded gatherings in Madurai and led the anti-untouchability campaign there. T.S. Soundaram with other women volunteers like S. Thayammal, R. Lakshmikantham, V. Akilandeswari, N.M.R.S. Parvathavarthini, N. Lakshmi Bharathi, Dr. PitchaimuthuAmmalandMeenakshiAmmal visited the slums to render their service to the Harijans and their children. They cleared the surroundings of the slums, brought soaps and oil and gave bath to the slum children. They started a day-and-night school for giving education to the Harijan children and gave banyans& towels and slates at free of cost. Messrs. Chari & Ram Co. offered scholarships to the Harijan students. The volunteers made anti-alcoholic propaganda by conducting public meetings. They provided neat dresses to the poor Harijans and were brought around the four Chithirai Streets for bhajans. They arranged for them inter-communal-dinings (samabandhibojanam). A team led by LakshmanaPerumalPillai and his wife made village-to-village visits along with T.S. Soundaram and other selfless devoted women workers and made effective propaganda for sanitation and hygiene in the Harijan colonies of Madurai region. Dr. T.S. Soundaram and

other women workers went to each and every house in Madurai and preached about the demerits of untouchability. Through inter-communal dinings, a feeling of oneness was inculcated among the people.

Education of the Depressed Classes

As a result of the recommendations of the women workers education of the Harijans had been fostered in various ways. T.S. Soundaram, Veerammal and Madras Branch of All India Women's Conference played a significant role in removing their disabilities. In the meeting held at Kovilpatti in Tirunelveli under the presidentship of Mrs. Nesamani Paul, stress was given to the upliftment of the depressed classes through education. The efforts of the women pioneers, one way or the other, made the government to introduce reforms in the field of education of the depressed classes. In the field of education the main activities were the grant of scholarship, maintenance of schools, opening of hostels, supply of noon-meals, books, slates, note-books and sanctioning of scholarship. The demands of the women reformers had been to get the Harijan pupils admitted into the existing schools and to open special schools for them. The authorities of the private schools were compelled to take in the Harijan pupils on the threat of withdrawal of grants, but since the passing of the Civil Disabilities Act of 1947 the Harijan pupils had equal rights with other pupils for admission into all educational institutions. Ten percent of the seats in all recognized secondary and training schools and all Arts and Professional colleges had also been reserved for them and a number of schools too had been opened for them. In Madurai in 1951-52 there were 13 schools for the Harijans and eligible communities in which 714 boys and 303 girls were studying. In 1952-53, in South Arcot 177 schools were opened and 924 boys and 4,510 girls studied in those schools. In 1956-57 in Coimbatore, 22 schools were opened for the Harijans and eligible communities in which 893 boys and 401 girls were studying. In 1966 there were 118 schools in Chengleput district. According to the enforcement of demands of the women workers number of Harijan pupils were benefited.

In Trichy Self-respector Veerammal had undertaken strenuous measures for making educational facilities to the Harijans. In 1954, a meeting of the depressed classes was conducted in the house of self-respector Rukmani Karunakaran under the presidentship of V. Neelambal. It decided to found an association of Tamilnadu SC Women's Welfare and to visit Harijan bastis in towns and villages and approach government and local ladies to redress the grievances of Harijans by carrying on various propaganda, to organize talks and lecturers to help Harijans to get rid of their inferiority complex and to give help to educate the Harijans. This association was inaugurated under the presidentship of the then Collector of Trichy Mr. R.S. Malaiyappan; Managatham Chandrasekhar Union Deputy Minister for Social Welfare lit the light of Kuttuvilakku and opened the name board of the association and gave a speech on the policies of the association. Tanjore Municipal

councilors Pattammal, M.P.V. Veerasamy, JagadambalArulaiyah felicitated the function. The association made earnest efforts for the slum welfare, to keep their places clean and tidy, to cultivate in the residents the habit of thirst and to elevate their social status by temperance and to develop a sense of civic responsibility, to start night schools for adult education. Veerammal and the members of the Association adopted villages and set up schools for Harijan pupils and organized Social Education Propaganda Campaign. Number of teachers were appointed for low salary in their schools, on account of the want of funds. They could not continue their works. No doubt they rendered their service for the upliftment of the Harijan pupils.

On the basis of the efforts of Veerammal and Madras branch of AIWC and WIA the state government introduced number of programmes for the spread of education among the depressed. The number of admission in schools was considerably high. But it declined with the advance of the years. Several of the pupils left the schools in the middle due to poverty and other related problems. To tackle this issue of dropout measures such as free supply of books and slates and introduction of mid-day meal schemes were tried by the State Government. In Madurai the government spent Rs.17,387 over the mid-day meals apart from the common mid-day meals programme. The Harijan welfare Department and the Backward Classes Dept. had been running a separate mid-day meals programme for the students those were admitted in the schools by the respective departments.

On the basis of the resolution passed by the Madras branch of AIWC, Hindu Women's Association, HarijanSevakSangh, Harijan Welfare Association and the Adidravida Welfare Association the legislature contributed much for the development of education of the depressed. The legislators had always played an important role in promoting the education of the depressed classes not only by enacting laws but also by other means such as initiating discussion over notions and budgetary demands moving resolutions and by way of eliciting information and drawing the attention of the government during the question hours, thus highlight the problem of the people. The government had been imparted education in all elementary and secondary schools whether special, public or private to all the Harijan pupils whatever be the income of their parents. In the case of high schools the full concession fee had been allowed only where the income of the parents does not exceed Rs.1,200 per annum and in the case of colleges only if the annual income does not exceed Rs.1,500. Many scholarships including residential scholarships have been offered to the Harijan students in elementary and secondary schools as well as in the college. In Madurai thirty non-residential scholarships of the value of Rs.1,485 and 253 residential scholarships of the value of Rs.85,075 were given to the Backward class students and 1194 non-residential scholarships involving a sum of Rs.19,565 were given to the Harijan students for ordinary education. In South Arcot 559 non-residential scholarships of the value of

Rs.10,322 and 77 residential scholarships of the value of Rs.31,790 were given to the Harijan students. In Chengleput till 1976-77, pre-matric and non-residential scholarships were sanctioned to the Adi-Dravidar from I to XI standard and the amount of scholarship was dispersed in cash to the students towards the cost of books and special fees. The examination fee was also paid in cash. The maximum annual income of parent or guardian fixed for the sanction of schooling was Rs.3,000. These concessions attracted the Harijan parents to send their children to the schools that led to the increase in students' strength.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Soundram, Ponnammal of Nilakkottai and other women members of the Legislative Assembly namely Smt. Hemalatha Devi, standing committee member of AIWC, Smt. Lakshmikanthan of Madurai, Smt. Satyavanimuthu, strong worker for the welfare of the SCs and the Minister for Harijan welfare, ManonmaniAmmal of Ulunthurpet, Smt.N.K. Ranganayaki of Coimbatore, Smt. Anandanayaki of Madras expressed their opinions in the legislature for the upliftment of the Harijans through much more educational concessions. As a result full exemption from the payment of examination fees had been granted to the Harijan students in the case of all government examinations and in the case of university examinations whenever half exemption was granted, the government had made grants to the students to meet the other half. Several government hostels for the Harijan students had been provided and private hostels for such students exist, they had been subsidized by the government. In 1951-52 in Madurai, there were 30 private hostels for the Harijan students subsidized by the govt. at a cost of Rs.1, 28,400. Of these the Sevalaya Hostel, Madurai and the Harijan hostel at Usilampatti were the largest received grants amounting to Rs.16,950 and 15,000 respectively in Tamilnadu. In 1952-53 in South Arcot there were private hostels for the Harijans subsidized by the govt. at a cost of Rs.40,350 of these the Victory Memorial Scheduled Classes Hostel, Vriddhachalam and the Gandhi Poor Students Hostel, Kattumannarkoil received grants amounting to Rs.11,850 and Rs.6,900 respectively. In 1956-57 in Coimbatore there were 18 private hostels for the Harijans subsidized by the government at a cost of Rs.81,360. The establishment of hostels gave a feasible condition to the Harijan students to concentrate on their education and to their future prospects.

The dream of Gandhiji is now being made capable of realization. The women social reformers have deliberately and systematically endeavored to remove the social disabilities of the depressed people and to improve their economic condition. Thus the one big change in the position of the depressed is that in the urban areas on the basis of their education, employment and income, they are in a position to move into the middle class, but in the villages it is impossible for them to experience an change in status. The urgent need is to step up social work in the rural areas and to improve the economic condition of the Harijans. Of heart among all caste Hindus is absolutely necessary the depressed can take

them right and equal members of the society, legislative and executive can pave the way, but the goal can be reached only with the whole hearted support and co-operation of the people.

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