



The Plight Life Condition of the *Puthirai Vannan* (a Washer man Community) in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: Health is one of the significant developmental indicators in the lives of humans and is a basic necessity for humans to happily survive on Earth. According to Article 25 of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights, everyone has the right to standard of living and health, including adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, and related necessary services. However, particularly in developing and underdeveloped countries, not everyone is privileged to enjoy these rights. In the past decades, India has achieved tremendous achievements in the health sector. In India, a human's life expectancy has exceeded the age of 67 years, and infant and under-five-year mortality rates have started declining. Many diseases, such as polio, Guinea worm disease, yaws, and tetanus, no longer exist. However, health is closely associated with people's occupation and caste in some extend.

India's occupational method is based on the caste of the individuals and is preset by the birth of individuals living in India. The caste system is a harsh reality faced by people and plays a major role in the distribution of power and adequate services. Dalits are the most depressed and vulnerable people, particularly in rural areas, who do not have permanent work and sufficient income, and are unable to acquire adequate healthcare services. Dalits are forced to do menial jobs, thereby posing health issues. Because of the caste system, Dalits' nature of occupation, economic condition, and low knowledge of healthcare and preventive measures prevent them from accessing proper healthcare facilities. The caste discrimination exists even among them. Regarding this, the plight of life condition of the *Puthirai Vannan* community (who wash the clothes of the Dalits living in Tamil Nadu) has been described in this study. According to the Indian social system caste classification, they are placed at the bottom and were once considered unseeables; their major occupation being washing clothes and doing the unskilled labor. Hence, this community is deprived of basic needs such as food house and healthcare facilities, thereby leading to health problems. They already suffer from social and economic conditions, and the health issues have made their life miserable.

Keywords: Puthirai Vannan, life condition, TamilNadu, Social, health, economic

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Introduction

Indian society has been classified into different caste groups other than the tribals. The fourfold caste system of Varna has been divided into Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. All these do not belong to any of the four castes known by the names Avarna or “casteless” people. These people are called untouchables, and there is a kind of hierarchy within this system, the lowest being the dhobis. *Puthirai Vannans*, once treated as unseeables, wash the clothes of the untouchables.

Puthirai Vannan (Dalit Dhobi)/Washermen Community in Tamil Nadu

Dalits are still treated as untouchables, the *Puthirai Vannan* community being the lowest in order and are considered Dalits among the Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar described the abject condition of the *Puthirai Vannans*: “In Tirunelveli District of the Madras Presidency there is a class of unseeables called *Purada Vannans*. Of them it is said that they are not allowed to come out during daytime because their sight is enough to cause pollution. These unfortunate people are ‘compelled’ to follow the nocturnal habits, leaving their dens after dark and scuttling home at the false dawn like the badger, the hyena, the aardvark.” Among the scheduled castes, those washing the clothes of Dalits are called *Puthirai Vannan*. They are also known by different names: *Puruda Vannan* (Thirunelveli), *Pothara Vannan*, *Poratha Vannan*, *Puthara Vannan*, *Thurumbar*, *Iraappadigal*, *Podara Vannan*, *Purathu Vannan*, and *Puthirai Vannan*, *Puthirai Vannan* being the most popular currently. The Tamil Nadu government has registered by the name *Puthirai Vannan* in the selection commission. These people wash the clothes of the Pallars, Pariyahs, and Arunthathiyars communities. They live on other people’s properties or on properties belonging to the government, usually near the water bodies. Because there are only one or two *Puthirai Vannan* families present in the villages, they do not have the security and protection against the other Dalits and caste people for doing caste jobs and are forced to wash the clothes and perform village ceremonies. They are not paid salary and are provided with some leftover food and grain during the harvest season. These people are expected to perform the ceremonies on behalf of the families of other castes. They are made to wash the clothes of a newborn’s mother. When a girl attains puberty, she has to wash their menstrual clothes. They are also made to do all work during any marriage happening in their area. They are forced to make a hearse cart and made to wait till the end during funerals. During village festivals, there are made to clean temple surroundings and bear torches during the deity’s procession. They are also made to wash dead bodies, which is traditionally a

commoner's job. Most of the people are currently paid, but in some villages, they still have to beg in return for work.

They can be found throughout the state but only two or three families live in the outskirts of each Dalit village. Most of these people, also known as Thurambar, wash the clothes of Dalits, and live outside the village limits in huts, and do not own any land. When a Dalit villager wants someone to wash their clothes and perform other menial tasks, a family is made to build a hut on a small piece of land and forced to live there. Each Dalit village traditionally has at least one such family, known locally as *Oorukku-oru-kudi* (one family for the village).

Untouchability and Oppression in the *Cherry* and *Vannakudi*

The settlement area of people in India is one well-known evidence of the social disparity. Villages are divided into two: main village (*Ur*), the living area of caste people, and *Cherry*, the living area of the untouchables. Both areas are separated by a huge boundary. For the Dalits, there is a separate settlement area for the *Puthirai Vannan* community called *Vannakudi*. The upper caste people do not enter the settlement areas of the Dalits; likewise, the Dalits do not enter the settlement areas of the *Puthirai Vannan* unless absolutely needed and also do not enter the houses of the *Puthirai Vannan*.

The washing method of *Puthirai Vannan*

Most of the *Puthirai Vannans* wash clothes, rear ducks, perform funeral ceremonies, and do agriculture, each of which presents different stages and challenges. For example, washing clothes involves washing, adding blue, starching the clothes, and classifying the clothes. The following are the brief traditional occupational methods of *Puthirai Vannan*.

Collecting the dirty linens

All family members of the *Puthirai Vannan* collect dirty linens from every house, from morning to afternoon but are not allowed to enter Dalits' houses. They finally enclose the clothes in a bundle and deliver separately to each house.

Finding out the sand (*Uvar Mann*)

They collect *Uvar Mann* after the rainy season, keep it with them till the next rainy season, heap them in one corner of the house, and cover it with sacks to avoid it from wetting.

Marking the clothes

They mark all the clothes using different symbols to avoid confusion as to which family they belong to and have been doing this since a long time.

Steaming

Steaming is done professionally. Because nylon, terlin, terricotton, etc., are used today, this system is not practiced currently.

Funeral services

Puthirai Vannars' work is related to the lifecycle of the people to whom they serve, and it is at funerals that they are needed the most. The following are the services done at funerals: confirming the death, informing relatives, making panthal (a temporary shed made of coconut leaves and bamboo sticks), making a padai (hearse cart), performing final rituals, nadaipavadai (spreading of the cloth to walk upon), Harichandra, final rites in the cremation ground, spreading the cloth for final distribution of money, and washing the clothes of the dead.

Other activities of *Puthirai Vannan*

They shift paddy and also rear ducks for additional income. Some of them also know traditional art forms such as Udukkai, Pambai, and Silambattam and assist in performing ceremonies of other Dalit groups such as Pariahs during puberty celebration of marriage, valaikaapu (baby shower), and ear boring.

Ceremonies of the *Puthirai Vannan*

They perform ceremonies for themselves and for their deity. They worship the water bodies, where they wash clothes, and the oven (Vellavi), where they steam clothes, also called *Mylar kumbiduthal*.

Practice Medicine

They also practice medicine and treat people using herbs and traditional treatment. They also practice midwifery. When breastfeeding women face difficulty in generating milk, *Puthirai Vannan* women treat them. They also treat people suffering from bowel misplacement problem.

Physical Health Issues Faced by the *Puthirai Vannan*

“Vannaanthurai” (washermen’s port) is the term used to describe the place where they wash clothes. They do not use soap or detergent, but use “uzhavumann” (ploughed clay), which is soft. They use this to wash clothes as it does not have any stones or pebbles. The clay dissolved in large earthen vessels, in which the clothes are dipped, washed, and rinsed. Afterward, the clothes are left for “vellavi” (a steaming method traditionally followed by the washers). The mud (Uzhavu Mann) causes sore feet, soda powder is used nowadays, and bleaching powder to clear the dirt. Washing clothes under the scorching makes them suffer from burns, where as using a heavy iron box causes them to wither as the heat emitted from the iron box affects the kidneys and internal organs. Soda water falls on them when wrenching clothes, and bleaching water falls on their legs, which causes psoriasis.

Issues Faced by the Children of *Puthirai Vannan*

Proper health condition of children is the top priority for both family and community. The children of this community are prone to many health-related issues, one of them being ulcer. Because they do not eat on time and do not take nutritional food, they suffer from malnutrition and stomach pain. Child mortality is prevalent among this community. During the pandemic, no village admitted them, and hospitals also refused to treat them, thereby leading to more deaths. Since they drink water procured from different locations, it causes stomachache and diarrhea. Since children also often accompany the parents to wash clothes, the parents sometimes leave them behind, which leads to many unintentional drowning incidents. Some children have also been bitten by snakes and poisonous insects.

Issues Faced by the *Puthirai Vannan* Women

The women in the *Puthirai Vannan* community face lots of social- economic and occupation related health problems. They are discriminated socially in three levels: lower caste people, Dalits, and women. Economically, they are not able to work independently and get paid as most often they are paid in kind other than money. Occupation condition is another major problem for the women. While washing clothes using soda, their hands become dry and wounded as soda is highly poisonous chemical that leads to alopecia, peeling out of skin, and weak hands. They also wake up at 4 am, carry heavy loads of clothes on their head, and walk a long distance.

Conclusion

Even after 75 years of independent India, Dalits have been facing social, economic, educational, and political exclusion by the dominant castes. Discrimination between the people is a social immorality and crime. It is even more precarious for the people to get discriminated within the Dalit communities. These voiceless and powerless people suffer physically and psychologically. Conversion to other religion is also notable to provide social equality to these people. Therefore, their life is in plight condition. Hence, their last hope is that constitutional-based empowerment is the only solution to come out from their plight life condition. Hence, the government needs to take care of these people and provide basic necessities such as food, health, and shelter, in addition to social economic and political empowerment. Finally, we hope the outcome of this study will help in understanding the existing deep-rooted caste system connected with their traditional professions and make their life happy. Therefore, the governments need to make alternative professional arrangements and ensure their economic and healthy livelihood is met.

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