

IC Case Study - Arundithiyar Movement in Tamil Nadu

Description of the practice:

What was/is the background to the practice? Describe any key events or actions that led to it?

In Tamil Nadu, there are three main sub groups of Dalits Arunthathiyar, Pallar and Parayar. Arunthathiyar are the 'lowest' group and are often referred to as the 'Dalits of the Dalits.' The 2001 Census reported that the Arunthathiyar population is 1,500,000. Almost all manual scavenging (sanitary) work is done by Arunthathiyar; they comprise the majority of those subject to illegal 'bonded' labour, often through usurious loans; an overwhelming majority of untouchability practices are practised on them (even by other Dalits); 95% are landless; and Arunthathiyar women are disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation. When Arunthathiyar complain it often brings a backlash from the dominant community. Arunthathiyars receive less than 10% of employment and education reservations (to correlate with their proportion of the Dalit population, this should be at least 30%); they are under represented on committees concerned with Dalit welfare and rights and those committees do not function properly. They are under-represented in local government (even when elected they are dominated by others so that Arunthathiyar wards/areas of the village miss out).

What was/is the title/name of the practice?

Arundithiyar Movement in Tamil Nadu

What was/is the aim/purpose of the practice?

To uphold the rights of Arundithiyar and prevent atrocities. To tackle caste discrimination and to organise and empower Arundithiyar communities.

What was/is the target group(s)?

Arundithiyar communities, focussing on Theni District.

Targets for lobbying and advocacy include local and district authorities, state government, police and other caste communities.

Who were/are the partners involved (e.g. community based, NGO-based, government institutions, and other related stakeholders)?

AMMI - *Arunthithiyar Mukkal Munnetra Iyyakam* – people's movement

Arogya Agam an NGO who has supported and worked with AMMI since 2008.

Village Service Trust – UK NGO - current funder of AMMI through Arogya Agam

What was/is the duration of practice?

Ongoing – this case highlights some of the outcomes of the last three years.

Legal and institutional frameworks:

The movement has drawn on national legislation such as Prevention of Atrocities Act and Right to Information Act. It has also lobbied for the just and equal distribution of government benefits and entitlements for Dalits.

Implementation of the practice:

In just a few years 'AMMI' *Arunthithiyar Mukkal Munnetra Iyyakam* (Arundithiyar people's unity movement) has made stong progress through **organising, human rights training, lobbying and campaigning**. Achivements include

- Securing a **separate Arundithiyar reservation** of 3%, within the 18% dalit reservation, for government jobs and seats in academic institutions. For the first time since independence - one Dalit community - has been given a special reservation within Dalits.
- **Co-ordinating** a march of 8000 Arundithiyar in the town of Theni to publicise the rights abuses they experience. This is possibly the largest gathering of Arundithiyar ever seen.
- **Legal Action** - Taking up of 276 cases of denial of common property rights with full or partial success with 117. Taking up of 39 cases of violence against women. Registered 32 cases under the Prevention of Atrocity Act¹
- **Organising and training** -Arunthathiyars are now more visible and vocal – they have now become a known entity with movements now active in 11 key districts. As a result Arunthathiyar people have increased their access to government benefits, jobs and education, and their villages have benefited from new infrastructure. Other castes increasingly realise that Arunthathiyars can no longer be abused and cheated with impunity.

Arunthathiyar people now suffer from fewer human rights abuses including the practice of untouchability, violence, sexual violence and caste based verbal abuse. Arunthathiyar are increasingly losing their fear and submissiveness. The youth increasingly realise that long established repressive and demeaning customs and traditions accepted by their elders no longer need be adhered to. The community at large is increasingly realising that abuse of Arunthathiyars will no longer be tolerated – people have been heard to say “..there are no longer Sakkiliars (abusive term) only Arunthathiyars”.

Describe the successes and challenges to implementing the practice, if needed with inspiration from the following guiding questions:

Strategies

Arunthathiyars have come together to form 1,125 mandrams. **Mandrams** are 'clubs' or 'voluntary activist groups' composed of Arundithiyar from a hamlet or group of hamlets, some will be women's self-help group members, others local government members. The aim is to have an equal numbers of men and women and some young people.

Mandrams:

- Act on issues at a local level with the support of AMMI.
- Encourage the use of the village council and local electorate meetings to have their particular needs addressed.

¹ This is a crucial but barely used piece of legislation. It covers a range of caste based crimes from verbal abuse to illegal eviction, rape and murder. It does not allow the accused to be released on bail and financial compensation is normally obligatory.

- Ensure that all Arundithiyar have a 'ration card' so they can receive subsidised food grains, are registered properly on the 'Below Poverty Line' list (so that they are eligible for pro-poor schemes) and NREGS (a government employment scheme) and assist people to apply for loans, housing, other government benefits.
- Motivate families to keep their children in school and encourage those who have dropped out to restart.

AMMI and the Mandrams had given Arundithiyar the confidence to respond effectively to issues resulting in reduced overall levels of atrocity and discrimination. Mandrams have become a powerful force bringing together youth, women's self help group leaders and elected representatives of local bodies. The mandrams have now formed a self sustaining grassroots movement of Arunthathiyar to bring the process and to bring Arunthathiyar into the political mainstream.

Specific Campaigns – two tumbler system and burial grounds

In 2008 a survey was conducted in Theni District by Arogya Agam. It found that in 286 villages where Arunthathiyar lived - 196 practiced the two tumbler system (separate glasses for Arunthathiyar) and 75 had no allocated burial ground for Arunthathiyar so people were forced to bury family members by the road side or canals.

AMMI first focused on the two tumbler issue. Activists went to a village where discrimination was particularly bad and broke tumblers outside tea shops. This event was covered in all leading newspapers and channels. The District Superintendent of police called AMMI activists and spent two hours with them threatening them with government action. They explained the situation and the discrimination that was occurring. The District Head of Police then went to visit random villages to do his own check. As a result he had to accept that the two tumbler system was operating. A new programme announced by the state government created awareness on the need for non-discrimination in tea shops. The tea shop owners were called together and told not to discriminate. The activists and police used legislation 310. To assist the process AMMI selected key problem villages where they held village meetings to explain the situation and problem to everyone - at end of every programme they all had tea together. In 2009 AMMI carried out another survey which found that the two tier system still existed in 56 villages where Dalits had to use plastic cups. AMMI gave a list of the names of these shops to the District Collector who promised to take action. Again the police called shop owners together and threatened them with legal action. As a result this practice has now been eliminated.

In 2009 AMMI took up the issue of burial grounds. The Tamil Nadu Government announced a holiday scheme (Pongol) where free rice and sugar would be distributed to all. AMMI displayed a digital banner on all district offices saying 'We don't want Pongol free rice we want a burial ground for our self dignity.' The District Collector called AMMI to discuss the issues. He responded positively and within a week 42 villages were allocated a proper burial ground – campaigns for burial grounds to be allocated in all villages continues.

Challenges - As Arunthathiyars assert their right to a just and equal position in society caste groups that used to exploit them feel their dominant position is threatened. Already we have seen a backlash from some caste groups. Now the fear is that the most powerful castes may lend their weight to the backlash.

Case Study 1 - Karutama and Velan are a couple in their 50s living in the Arunthathiyar village of MGR Nagar. One evening, their two sons were knocked down by a higher caste man on a motor-cycle, who, instead of apologising, started a fight. Later that evening, a gang of higher caste men began attacking everyone in the village. "They hit us with sticks, beat the children and pulled the women's saris off." Meanwhile the

motorcyclist went to the police and complained that he had been attacked by Karutama and Velan's son. The next day, supported by AMMI, the people of MGR Nagar went to the police. But the police refused to register a case. The Arunthathiyars began to shout and finally six AMMI members were charged with 'public nuisance' and 'damaging government property'. Karutama and Velan were determined not to give up and with the support of AMMI approached the high court which ordered that the men who attacked the village be arrested under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The assailants were shocked that Karutama and Velan had managed to invoke this Act and kept approaching them to drop the case. They said: "Let's forget it, let's live in peace', but we have had so many experiences like this, we know if we compromise it will just happen again - we want justice this time." For Karutama and Velan, this was an opportunity to finally change things. "This should make the higher castes think – and make us safer in the future."

Case Study 2 - The 20 men and 20 women of the AMMI branch in Muthurengapuram have had numerous trainings on human rights and how to achieve them. So when the government installed a new overhead tank for drinking water supply and the panchayat connected the supply to the upper caste areas but not the Arunthathiyar village they knew what to do. First they petitioned the panchayat president. When that failed they threatened to go to the Collector (top district official) and to block the road in protest. At that the president agreed to provide the water connection. Many of the tiny houses in Muthurengapuram have three or four families crowded into them. So AMMI has identified some waste land suitable for building houses and is now petitioning the Collector for land rights and the Dalit Welfare Board for funds.

Case study3 - My name is Tamilselvi and I am 13 years old. I was studying in government middle school at Vilankurichi. I am an Arunthathiyar. For the past few years the teachers made the 15 Arunthathiyar students clean the toilets. I told our movement about it. They said that we need not clean the toilets and they came and talked to our teacher and the headmistress. We thought the problem would stop and so I told the others not to clean the toilets. But both the teacher and the headmistress shouted and used very bad words and beat us. The next day again we did not clean the toilets, we were beaten and all 15 of us were sent out of the school.

A big crowd made the Kovilpalayam police register a case under the Prevention of Atrocity Act. For a week nothing happened and so the movement organised a demonstration. We went with our parents and others and shouted slogans in front of the office of the Collector (a senior government official) at Coimbatore. Only then the teacher and the headmistress were suspended and transferred. We were taken back to the school and all of us are still studying there and we don't have to clean the toilets now. I am happy that my refusing to clean the toilets helped, but this change took place because all of us students and our parents and our movement were united.

Publicity:

Can IDSN use this case publicly, e.g. on an open conference website or in a conference report? Yes
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