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SOCIAL ISSUES

Hidden apartheid

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in Madurai

A recent survey carried out by the TNUEF brings to light details of the discrimination Dalits in Madurai have faced for generations.

PICTURES: K. GANESAN



The homes of sanitary workers at Gomespalayam. In all these slums, the narrow, overcrowded lanes between houses are used by the residents as bathrooms and storerooms.

OVER seven decades have rolled by since the freedom fighter A. Vaidhyanatha Iyer successfully led Dalits into the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, overcoming all the impediments posed by the casteist forces that were hell-bent on thwarting the historic event. But the stark reality is that “hidden apartheid” against Dalits continues in different areas of this famous temple city, not to speak of the prevalence of untouchability in several villages in Madurai district.

An extensive survey of 21 Dalit habitations by activists of the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) has brought to light the discrimination that Dalits living in the city have faced for generations. The findings explode the myth that discrimination is experienced by Dalits only in isolated villages and that the evil practice is on the wane. But the political parties except those of the Left by and large maintain a stoic silence on the issue.

Releasing the report of the study on December 18, 2009, P. Sampath, State convener of the TNUEF, said Dalits in Madurai city were haunted by problems such as poor health and unhygienic living conditions. They also lacked proper housing, a proper environment for education, employment opportunities, financial assistance for self-employment and social mobility, and faced delays in the disbursement of welfare assistance, including old-age pension, he said. Non-issuance of pattas for those who have been residing in the city for more than three decades is another issue highlighted by the organisation. The plight of sanitary workers, those working in cremation grounds, and cobblers who belong to the Arunthathiar community has also been brought to light.

Interactions with a cross section of Dalits, trade union functionaries, activists of non-governmental organisations, and experts on various related areas confirmed the veracity of many of the findings. The most pressing problem faced by Dalits is residential segregation. It may be a rude shock to the city's many visitors that Dalits, who form a little less than 10 per cent of its population of over 1.1 million, by and large live in segregated colonies. These habitations, which come under 19 major slum clusters, including Aruldossapuram, Sellur, Munichilai, Thideer Nagar, Sathamangalam, Anuppanadi and Villapuram, are spread over many of the city's 72 wards, including the ones represented by the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor.

There is ample evidence to show that Dalits are not recent settlers. The location of the major Dalit habitations just outside the four gateways – Melavaasal, Keezhavaasal, Therkuvaasal and Vadakkuvaasal – clearly indicates that during the Nayak period (the 16th and 17th centuries) itself they lived on the outskirts of the town, a senior archaeologist told *Frontline*. These areas are now prime locations in the city, thanks to its expansion. According to him, the Arunthathiar who speak Telugu might have come as part of the entourage of Viswanatha Nayak in the 16th century A.D. and settled on the outskirts of the town as the fort, moat and gateways were developed during this period. Old revenue records also speak of “Pallar Mayanam” (burial ground of Pallars), which existed near Palanganatham, he pointed out.

A sizable number of slum-dwellers are sanitary workers who belong to the Arunthathiar community, which is at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Others are daily-wage earners such as manual workers, ragpickers, hawkers, load men and rickshaw pullers.

Even in slums that have mixed populations, the dwelling units of Dalits are confined to clearly demarcated streets. A classic example is the slum at Thathaneri, where streets have been named after the sub-sects of the Scheduled Castes. Even in official records such as family cards issued by the Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection Department, a street where Dalits reside has been referred to as “Pallar Street” though it was officially renamed long ago. Some public distribution outlets have been named “Harijan cooperative fair price shops” as mentioned in the family cards.

“There is a point in Dalits preferring to live in habitations where their neighbours are from the same community. They still feel insecure if they move out of these habitations. This tendency only shows that urbanisation has not helped them shed the feeling of insecurity. Urbanisation is not a panacea for the problems of socially and economically deprived sections,” said B.S. Chandrababu, general secretary of the South Indian History Congress. He feels that the Left and progressive forces should spearhead the campaign to end all forms of discrimination against Dalits.

Dogged by problems such as poor water supply and sanitation facilities, high population density and poor infrastructure, Dalits have to coexist with pigs and stray dogs in most of these crowded slums. These habitations fit in with the definition of slums under Section 3 of the Tamil Nadu Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, 1971. They are “(i) in any respect unfit for human habitation” and are “(ii) by reason of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of streets, lack of ventilation, light or sanitation facilities, or any combination of these factors, detrimental to safety, health or morals...” Almost all the houses in these slums are arranged in narrow lanes and each has a single room with a built area of 10 × 10 feet or less. It may sound odd but is, nevertheless, true that each accommodates around 10 people as Dalits, particularly Arunthathiar, have been forced to adopt the joint family system owing to lack of space in their habitations.

Although slum-dwellers who belong to communities other than the Scheduled Castes also suffer owing to a lack of civic amenities, they at least enjoy a social status and do not have to worry about the caste stigma if they shift to better residential areas. But in the case of Dalits, seeking alternative accommodation outside these ghettos is not simple as non-Dalits are reluctant to sell or rent their houses to them, said M. Thangaraj, convener of the district unit of the TNUeF. Even as exorbitant real estate costs deny Dalits access to decent housing, their plots do not fetch the same market

price as those of non-Dalits in adjacent areas, according to K. Swaminathan, general secretary of the south zone unit of the All India Insurance Employees' Association.



Residents of Heera nagar, close to Kiruthamal Nadhi, live with the unbearable stench of sewage and garbage.

R. Rajagopal, joint convener of the district TNUEF and general secretary of the Madurai Municipal Corporation Sanitary Workers' Union, stressed the need for issuance of house site pattas to Dalits at Manjalmedu, Mela Ponnagaram, Mini Colony, Subramaniapuram, Keezh Madurai, Anuppanadi, Karumbalai, Virattipathu and Arasaradi.

Take, for instance, the Karumbalai slum, which has three subunits: S.M. Colony, P.T. Colony and Indira Nagar. The slum has as many as 2,000 households. A vast majority of them have not received house site pattas though they have been there for more than 30 years. "Though an underground drainage pipeline has been laid here, because of the non-provision of connections to individual houses there has not been any improvement in the sewer system," said A. Pandi, a resident of S.M. Colony. M. Pandiammal resides in P.T. Colony with her husband and four grown-up children. Cooking ragi outside her house near an open sewer, she said: "We don't have space for cooking or keeping our things. We ask our children to sleep outside the house. The Slum Clearance Board authorities have not issued pattas on the grounds of non-clearance of dues." In all these slums, the narrow, overcrowded lanes between the rows of houses are used by the residents as bathrooms and storerooms. "The open drain running around the slum breeds mosquitoes. Congestion and lack of air and light also add to our woes. During the monsoon, the situation becomes worse as the whole area is inundated and sewage mixes with drinking water," said M. Kaliammal, a resident of S.M. Colony.

The situation in Gomespalayam, which is in the ward represented by the Deputy Mayor, is in no way different from that of the other slums. M. Leela, wife of a Corporation sanitary worker, said that her family, which included four children and six grandchildren, lived in an 8 × 10 feet room. Bathrooms constructed by the Corporation in the slum have been abandoned because there is no water supply to them. Drinking water is supplied to the area only from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. As the open sewer in the slum gets clogged with silt every now and then, residents remove the silt using iron buckets.

The residents are sceptical of the Corporation authorities' proposed plan to shift them to another place so that tenements can be constructed by the Slum Clearance Board. They do not want the confusion that prevailed during the allotment of 240 newly constructed tenements at Thideer Nagar to happen in their case also. They described the travails of the displaced people of Thideer Nagar who were provided temporary shelters at Villapuram.

The conditions at Heera Nagar close to Kiruthamal Nadhi, a huge drainage canal in the Melavaasal area, are appalling. The residents have no option but to tolerate the stench of sewage and the garbage dumped on either side of the canal. The authorities have not yet taken up work on the project to build a wall along the canal to prevent flooding, Thangaraj pointed out. The slum at Subramaniapuram, which is part of the ward that elected the Mayor, is also in bad shape. Around 450 households in the slum wait for house site pattas. Over 1,500 people reside in Madurai Municipal Corporation Colony, which has only 90 houses constructed in a small area for sanitary workers of the civic body.

Open drains and heaps of rotting waste make life miserable for the residents of the Thandalkaranpatti slum. "In our area, mosquito repellents don't work," said M. Sumathi, who belongs to the Arunthathiar community.

Referring to reports that Tamil Nadu ranks first in urbanisation among the 15 major States in the country, experts point out that unchecked and rapid urbanisation has presented the civic administration with the formidable challenge of having to tackle issues such as pollution and the growing demand for resources and space. Slum-dwellers in general and Dalits in particular bear the brunt of the onslaught of urbanisation in Madurai. In a city where 450 tonnes of garbage is generated every day, the absence of an effective primary collection mechanism, the inadequacy of dumping yards and the lack of scientific disposal methods have added to the woes of these people.

Another major problem encountered by Dalits is the inadequate number of community toilets in the slums as none of their houses has individual toilets. There are around 480 toilets including 220 "pay and use" toilets. Almost half of them are defunct owing to poor maintenance. Many of the free toilets have been made deliberately non-functional by the contractors who were collecting fees for use of the pay and use toilets, activists of the TNUEF said.

The number of toilets built by the Corporation is far lower than the number required. Open-air defecation, particularly by children, is a common feature in the slums as daily-wage earners and sanitary workers have to spend around 25 per cent of their earnings just to use the toilet complexes. A fee of Rs.3 has been fixed for using latrines, and bathing at least once a day entails payment of another Rs.3, said G. Jeyaraj, founder of the Annai Teresa Rural Development Trust (ATRDT). For a family of five with a single breadwinner, this will work out to Rs.30 a day, whereas the real monthly income is Rs.3,000-4,000.

The Corporation should have appointed a minimum of 4,400 sanitary workers to satisfy the accepted norm of one sanitary worker for every 400 people in a city, said Rajagopal. Reluctance on the part of the authorities to increase the workforce has resulted in Arunthathiars performing the job of scavengers at hotels, hospitals and other private establishments for meagre wages. In certain areas, they have been asked to skin carcasses. In some areas, they have to do manual scavenging too, said N.P. Ramesh Kannan, an activist of the TNUEF. Though non-Dalits are recruited for the post of sanitary workers, they are given other jobs such as office assistants, Rajagopal alleged. At some tea stalls, sanitary workers are served tea in disposable plastic cups, he said.

According to Rajagopal, several of the preconditions laid down by the Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing & Development Corporation for the provision of loans and financial assistance to Dalits have facilitated the entry of middlemen. They have also paved the way for these deprived sections to walk into the debt trap set by private moneylenders, who charge exorbitant interest, he said. In the event of non-repayment of loans, women suffer insults and humiliation at the hands of these moneylenders. He also called for proper monitoring of the schemes being implemented to improve the welfare of Dalits and to improve the infrastructure in their habitations.

The unhygienic environment in the slums often results in health problems. Official sources admitted that against the sanctioned strength of 2,700 sanitary workers, only 1,847 were working and that the Corporation attempted to manage the situation by appointing 115 contract labourers and 681

workers on daily wages. Even for its regular sanitary workers, the Corporation has constructed only 200 one-room houses. The Corporation caters to the health needs of slum-dwellers through its 17 urban health posts and 17 maternity dispensaries, besides conducting health camps periodically, the sources claimed.

Education is another grey area. The dropout rate among Dalit schoolchildren is high. This is more so in the case of Arunthathiar children owing to the daily routine of their parents. A study conducted recently by the ATRDT found that 96 per cent of Arunthathiar children were admitted to Standard I in Corporation schools. However, the number dwindled to 60 per cent in Standard V and 45 per cent in Standard VIII. Around 20 per cent did not go beyond Standard X. Only a small percentage of children from this community proceeded further, finished Standard XII and joined colleges. The sudden death of the breadwinners of families also contributed to students abruptly discontinuing their studies as in the case of Ramar of Subramaniapuram, who chose to help his mother, a conservancy worker, after his father's demise.

Highlighting the problems faced by the wards of Dalits, S.K. Ponnuthai, joint convener of the district unit of the TNUEF and secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association's Madurai district unit, said that sanitary workers had little time to spare to take care of their children's education as their daily routine involved leaving the home before 5 a.m. "That is why we demand the introduction of a shift system for sanitary workers. This will ensure that at least one parent is at home to help the children leave for school on time," she said.

Even those children who score good marks in Plus Two find it difficult to enter the portals of higher education institutions, particularly those in the private sector, because of the huge fees levied by them. M. Murugan of Thandalkaranpatti holds diplomas in catering technology and electronics. Though he registered his name at the employment exchange 10 years ago, he is still waiting for a call letter. He ekes out a living by running a roadside eatery.

D. Alagammal, daughter of sanitary worker Valli of Karumbalai, recalled with gratitude the exemplary role played by her mother in enabling her to become a graduate against all odds. Having completed her BEd course a couple of years ago, she is waiting for the call letter to fulfil her dream of becoming a schoolteacher. P. Karthik of Subramaniapuram Colony, who has just completed his BA, aspires to become a lawyer. Candidates like them have to grope in the dark in the absence of proper counselling.

The TNUEF has decided to launch a sustained campaign to highlight the problems of the Dalits of Madurai in general, and it is striving to set up a coaching centre to help students of this deprived community in their educational pursuits, according to a spokesman of the organisation.