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THE LIVELIHOOD ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE GYPSY COMMUNITY WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO PALLAVARAM, CHENGALPATTU

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"As much as it's hard to accept, there is hate deep rooted amongst some people using tribe or race as a means to a political end. What makes it dangerous is that politicians have mastered how to weaponise this issue mixing truths & propaganda & religiously defending it".

- DON SANTO

ABSTRACT

Gypsies are considered a nomadic ethnic group of people who have their own unique tradition, culture, spiritual belief, language, livelihood and practices. Gypsies in India are specifically known for their colourful clothes and accessories, energetic dance and glorious music. In this 21st century, where one part of the world is celebrating technological advancement and the other part of the world is focusing on global development, there are people who are struggling for food, clothing, shelter, and dignity. The people who have the least participation in ***globalization,*** *privatization, urbanization, and global warming suffer a lot due to exploitation. Gypsies are people who had a livelihood based on forests; after many government prohibitions and because of big terms like globalization and urbanization, they have been socially excluded from society. Their normal day is extremely difficult and challenging as they go through* ***discrimination, isolation,*** *and* ***social neglect*** *on a daily basis.*

Gypsies in Tamil Nadu *are called* ***Narikuravars****; they have weird stories and misconceptions about them. As they have unique practices and different lifestyles, they are not included in society and are treated as outsiders by the local population. Narikuravars are micro self-entrepreneurs and skilled in handicrafts, but they are not yet recognized for their talent or hard work. They are usually generalized as sellers at red lights and sellers on local trains. They are even denoted as street beggars with infants. Gypsies have very little information about them, and their history is untold and invisible to the world. The challenges they face for their* ***livelihood*** *are not spoken about enough and not interpreted clearly. The* ***discrimination*** *they experience in public places, the exclusion they face, and their poverty should be addressed properly. Their houses without residential addresses and their socioeconomic crises need research. The aim of this research is to study the* ***livelihood*** *(nature of occupation) and* ***challenges*** *(Socioeconomic crisis) of* ***the gypsy community in Pallavaram,*** *bringing into the limelight as they lead a totally invisible life.*

KEYWORDS: *Gypsies, Narikuravars, Livelihood, Social exclusion, Discrimination, Poverty and marginalization, Socioeconomic crisis.*

GYPSIES BEING ETHNIC MINORITY

To trace the origin of similarity between gypsies, a generic study on Romani was conducted by Comas David at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Spain and the study revealed that gypsies in India has connection with gypsies in Europe, as the ancestors of Roma gypsies who are in Europe are ancient Indians who are migrated from Northwest parts of India to Europe for their livelihood. So, the gypsies of Europe are descendants of Rajputs and Jats of India. The ancestors of Roma left their mother land India to a foreign land about a thousand years ago during the „Muslim Invasion of India" for securing their cultural heritage and livelihood (The Role of Romanies, 2004). Indian Council for Cultural Relations, International Roma Conference held in 2016 documented the history, similarities of Indian culture and Roma culture and challenges of the Roma community along with creating awareness about Indian origin Internationally. The genesis of gypsies" community in South India, Tamil Nadu also has a connection with gypsies in Europe. From the theory proposed by Werth in 1966, "Domar are ancestors of Romani people and therefore, Narikuravas are related to Romani" (Joesvin, 2018).

The tribes form a major part of the total population in India. Approximately eight percent of India"s total population consists of tribes and among them the gypsies play a vital role (Tribal census in India, 2011). Although the gypsies around the globe have notable history and rich heritage, it is true that they are stigmatized and have so many misconceptions about them. They are still

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struggling for their rights, dignity, self-worth and social inclusion. In this advanced world of science and technology, these nomadic people who are practicing traditional values and holding cultural heritage are easily neglected or ignored. They are a socially marginalized and oppressed group of people across the world because of their uniqueness. As a result, they have minimum opportunity to participate in the development and have minimum privilege and socioeconomic well-being in the society.

OVERVIEW OF GYPSIES IN TAMIL NADU

In Tamil Nadu, there are about 8,500 Narikuravar families which is less than one percent of the population of Tamil Nadu. The Narikurava community transforms itself into every aspect of modernity but still the progressive political parties, those social organizations which are interested in social change/transformation which has so far addressed very diminutive issues of the Narikoravars community on the social, political front. The irony is that their participation in Enumeration through National Census Population has been dealt unjustly (Kirubanithi1 D and Rao Mohan Raj K, 2015). On September 14th 2022, the Union Cabinet approved the proposal of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to add twelve communities to the Scheduled Tribes (ST) list.

Narikuravars are Gypsies who are a nomadic indigenous group of people who follow certain norms and folkways as tradition in Tamil Nadu. Narikuravars are also called Kuruvikkarans in Tamil Nadu. They are fusion of two Tamil words “Nari" and Kuravar; Kuruvi and Karan where Narikuravan means Jackal people or fox people; and Kuruvikkaran means bird-catchers. As per their ancestral livelihood, they obtained these names (Tripathy, 2002; Thakur, 2010).

Although Narikuravars come under the same name under nomadic tribes, they are organized into clan systems inside their community. There are two clans, they are: Gujarato and Mevado. These two sub-divisions are based on two characteristics, they are: buffalo-sacrifice and goat-sacrifice. Each clan fulfills their character respectively. 10 The families in the Narikurava community have their own goddess worship and they sacrifice the goats and buffalo to the goddess. Each of the families in the Narikurava community secure an ancestral goddess property and they are called “Sami sotthu”. The festival for this worship will be held once in every year. Kinship, hierarchy and clan system are the most important features within the community. Only through these three principal factors, they acquire their identity and their position in the Narikuravar community. “Internally, Narikuravar society is divided into a number of hierarchically ordered patrilineal exogamous clans, which stand in fixed relationship to each other and are unevenly distributed over Tamil Nadu”, by Gabriele Alex (2009). Narikuravars are non-vegetarians and enjoy eating non-vegetarian foods especially birds. As they consume animals tabooed by settled Indian communities and other habits, they are called untouchables and were classified in the bottom part of the ‘Hindu Varna System’. According to them, their traditional food is beef or goat meat which is offered to the Goddess while worshiping. They mostly worship Goddess Marimmal, Kali, Meenakshi Amman and God Madurai Veeran.

BACKGROUND OF GYPSY COMMUNITY IN PALLAVARAM

Pallavaram which is in Chengalpattu district is governed by Municipal corporation which falls under Chennai Metropolitan Region. According to the provisional report of census India, the population of Pallavaram in 2011 is 2,15417; of which 1,07,492 people are female and 1,07,925 people males; the average literacy rate is 83.27%. Pallavaram is known for its cantonment and bustling residential colonies which were established during British rule in India. Narikuravar Colony in Pallavaram consists of more than 200 families. The livelihood of the people in the community is based on scavenging and Uzhavar sandhai. Uzhavar sandhai is the scheme which was launched by the Government of Tamil Nadu and it came to power in the year 2006 to promote direct contact between producer (farmer) and the consumer in Tamil Nadu. The Uzhavar sandhai functions once in a week i.e., on friday. The people from the Narikuravar community sell beads accessories, iron kitchen utilities and fancy items in the market.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research is a deep fact-finding inquiry describing, recording, analyzing and interpreting conditions that exist in the Narikurava colony, Pallavaram. It helps in discovering relationships between existing non-manipulated variables. It gives a proper basis for understanding current problems of the population in the Narikurava community and information is collected through interviews, questionnaires and systematic direct observation from people in Narikurava by direct field visit.

Total number of 50 members of Narikuravar Colony in Pallavaram, Chengalpattu were selected as respondents; People who belong to the Narikuravar Community in the age group of 18 - 50 years were chosen for the study. Interview schedule is the research instrument which is used for collecting information. Quantitative Numerical data is gathered from the sample selected from Narikurava colony and the data is generalized across groups of people. The respondents were selected using the Purposive Sampling method under non-probability sampling type. The data was gathered using direct face to face interviews and direct field visits. Pretesting was done to exclude repeated and irrelevant questions in the interview schedule and to include missing relevant questions in the interview schedule. The gathered data was processed manually by assigning code values to the data and the coded data was analyzed using code book and master sheet.

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SUMMARY OF MULTIFACETED DESCRIPTIVE DYNAMICS OF NARIKURAVA COMMUNITY IN PALLAVARAM

The Narikuravar community in Pallavaram, Tamil Nadu, faces numerous socio-economic challenges. A recent quantitative study highlights several critical findings regarding their demographics, education, employment, living conditions, and social issues. The majority of the Narikuravar population (74%) falls within the 18–38 years age group. Family structures are notably compact, with 34% of households comprising four members. Additionally, 32% of respondents reside with their extended families under the same roof. Regarding offspring, 32% have one child in their household.

Marital Practices: Early marriage is prevalent, with 46% of respondents marrying before the age of 18. Polygamy is practiced by 18% of the community. The Narikuravar community adheres to a patriarchal system, influencing various aspects of social and familial life. **Occupational Engagement:** A significant portion (36%) are engaged as street vendors, and all respondents are classified as unorganized workers. Notably, 28% are involved in scavenging activities. For those in small-scale businesses, 36% procure raw materials from Parrys, while 18% source from Tambaram. Transportation for work varies, with 42% utilizing buses and trains, whereas 30% work locally and do not regularly use public transport. Half of the street vendors sell their goods at Uzhavar Sandhai, a market operational once a week. **Income and Work Patterns:** Income levels are modest, with 34% earning between Rs. 4,001 and Rs. 6,000 per month. The majority (38%) work four days per week. Alarmingly, 56% began working between the ages of 5 and 10, indicating a high incidence of child labor driven by economic necessity and limited educational opportunities. **Educational Attainment:** Educational outcomes are concerning: 42% have completed primary schooling, while 36% are illiterate. The primary reasons for school dropout include discrimination and a lack of interest in studying, as reported by 74% of respondents. **Housing and Living Conditions:** While 72% own their homes, none possess land ownership documents, as the land belongs to the Cantonment Board. Housing quality varies, with 44% living in huts and only 28% in concrete houses. Regarding assets, 44% own a TVS XL vehicle, whereas 30% do not own any vehicle. **Access to Identification and Welfare Services:** Identification documentation is inconsistent: 98% have an Aadhar card, 56% possess a PAN card, but 20% lack a ration card, 76% do not have a birth certificate, and 36% are without a voter ID. These gaps hinder access to various government welfare services. **Basic Necessities and Infrastructure:** Basic needs are unmet for many families: 78% lack adequate food, 32% do not have access to clean drinking water, and 30% lack sufficient clothing. Infrastructure deficits are evident, with 50% of homes lacking drainage facilities and 28% without electricity. **Healthcare Access and Cultural Practices:** For medical needs, 32% seek assistance from the Cantonment hospital. Alcohol consumption is widespread, with 86% partaking, often as a culturally approved tradition. **Community Needs and Government Expectations:** The community expresses a need for financial assistance (48%) and infrastructure improvements, particularly road facilities with lighting (48%). Support primarily comes from individuals in the Pallavaram locality, aiding 78% of families. However, 74% report that no road maintenance has been conducted in their area, and 26% lack access to metro water pipes.

KEY CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED

- **Poverty:** Limited income and material possessions hinder the ability to meet daily needs such as food, clothing, and shelter.
- **Discrimination:** The community faces social exclusion due to unique cultural practices and attire, leading to prejudices in public spaces, retail establishments, and educational institutions.
- **Illiteracy and School Dropout Rates:** Economic hardships and discrimination contribute to low educational attainment and high dropout rates among children.
- **Child Marriage:** Cultural factors and economic insecurities result in early marriages, leading to early pregnancies and perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited education.
- **Poor Sanitation:** Inadequate waste management and sewage systems contribute to unsanitary living conditions.
- **Health Hazards:** Occupational activities like scavenging expose individuals to health risks, including dehydration, malnutrition, respiratory issues, and infections.
- **High Accident Rates:** The nature of street vending and cultural practices involving animals contribute to frequent accidents within the community.
- **Debt and Informal Lending:** Economic vulnerabilities have led many families into debt, with some subjected to exploitative lending practices, including bonded and child labour.
- **Insecurity of Tenure:** Residing on Cantonment land without ownership documents places the community at risk of eviction, threatening their homes and livelihoods.

BRIDGING THE GAP: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMPOWERING THE NARIKURAVAR COMMUNITY

The suggestions were made by reflecting on the major findings found in this study. The Narikuravar community got the status of Scheduled Tribes recently and will have opportunities to enlarge their livelihood choices. The empowerment of the gypsy community without interfering with the personal space, culture, traditions, ethics, customs and value system of the gypsies should be settled for the sustainable development of the Narikuravas in Pallavaram.

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- The Narikuravar community was included in the Scheduled Tribe list in September, 2022. As the Narikurava community is new to the ST Community, awareness on scheduled tribe reservations and tribal welfare programmes should be conducted to them in this crucial transition phase.
- Government should help the community by providing and distributing resources to ensure the basic needs of the community to step up the social ladder.
- As the dropout rate in the community is very high, dropout prevention programs should be conducted in the Narikurava community and motivation programs should be given to children in the Narikuravar community. Importance of education should be communicated to the Narikurava community to break the barrier that prohibits the children from going to school.
- A sensitization session should be conducted in Pallavaram to be sensitive towards less privileged locality people and treat them with dignity without discrimination. This sensitization program can reduce the discrimination rate of the Narikurava community.
- The employment opportunity of the Narikurava community is very less. This community is hardworking and self-sufficient but there is a lack of proper guidance and support.
- As most of the people in the Narikurava community sell handicraft jewellery, skill development class and creative handicraft making classes will help them improve the quality of their handmade selling product.
- The Narikurava community people who are selling handicraft products and doing small scale business do not have a marketplace to sell their products 68 except uzavar sandhai. So, a proper supplementary platform (e.g., Online – social media platform) for selling their product should be arranged by the NGOs or the government to promote traditional handicraft product of tribal community.
- There are no NGOs presently working in Pallavaram for the Narikuravar community. Self-Help group, community parliaments are new terms for them and should be applied in the community practically.
- Permanent settlement should be provided to the community as the people in the community are living in the same place for more than 100 years.
- Land rights should be assured by the government to acknowledge the basic right of the Scheduled Tribe. If the land rights are not given under any circumstances, housing in the nearby locality can be given without disturbing their livelihood opportunity for the community.
- To assure the basic wellbeing of the community, free health campaigns and health check-ups should be done occasionally with follow-ups in the community.
- As the Narikuravar community in Pallavaram experienced fire accidents and many road accidents, safety and security programmes should be carried out in the community to ensure the wellbeing of the community.
- There is no proper sanitation and hygiene in the community which in turn leads to many diseases to children in the community. The Pallavaram municipality should step in and clean the garbage around the community and provide a proper sanitation facility regularly.

CONCLUSION

The Narikurava Community is socially excluded from the society and effective strategies need to be adopted to enable them to restore their respect, self-determination and dignity. Though they gained some of the basic privileges, Narikuravas are still vulnerable and lagging in development and they are disadvantaged group who are hugely affected by poverty, discrimination, child marriage, child labour, illiteracy, social exclusion and eviction insecurities. Socioeconomic ignorance due to the practices of an impoverished economy and exploitation have made them economically poor. These huge issues are national problems which contribute to the high poverty rate of the nation. The growth of the nation is directly proportional to the growth of the economically weaker sections. It is sad that their voices are left unheard and lost in the noise of globalization and industrialization. An immediate program and policies should be introduced to address the challenges faced by the Narikurava Community. This is a high-time to initiate a new change which will lower the level of social evils occurring prevalently around the community.

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