

‘The Unseeables’ the Struggle of Puthirai Vannar Community: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract: Just as there is a hierarchy in the caste system, there exists hierarchy among the Dalits themselves. The community of Puthirai Vannar is considered to be in the lowest rung. They are known as Dalits among Dalits, labelled and kept aside as ‘unseeables’ – the mere sight of them makes the upper caste and superior Dalits defiled. This study aims at understanding the inner subjective world of the Puthirai Vannars and how they give meaning to their life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six people who belong to Puthirai Vannar community and have personal experience of caste discriminations. The transcripts of the interview were taken as the raw data and the data analysis was done using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This method was effective in exploring the inner world and the meaning of life of Puthirai Vannar community. The major themes that emerged were inhuman social practices, denial of human rights, emotional trauma and abuse of women and children. The themes and its related psychological phenomenon were discussed, limitations were analysed and suggestions for future research were proposed.

Keywords: Puthirai Vannar, caste discrimination, unseeables, victimization.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The natural law of the universe promotes harmony, equality and brotherhood among the human beings. The later civilizations and invasions introduced discriminatory elements. One such factor is the caste system. Caste system and hierarchy play an important role in various social interactions in India. “The caste system is a social division in India that stratifies various social groups, with a set of upper castes, “backward” castes, and the most oppressed group, Dalits” (Mahalingam, 2003, p. 738). This caste system divides the people as superior and inferior. Very particularly, the Dalits are not even considered as human beings and were called ‘untouchables’. There exists gradation even among the Dalits themselves. The community of Puthirai Vannar is considered to be in the lowest rung. They are known as Dalits among Dalits, labelled and kept aside as ‘unseeables’ – the mere sight of them makes the upper caste and superior Dalits defiled. Hence, they were not allowed to come out in broad daylight for generations and were treated inhumanly for centuries. This discrimination continued even after the establishment of the Untouchability Act of 1955 (Ramaiah, 2011). This research focuses on understanding the inner world and life experiences of Puthirai Vannar community.

The word ‘Dalit’ is translated into “oppressed” or “broken” – is generally used to refer to people who were once known as ‘untouchables’, those belonging to castes outside the fourfold Hindu Varna system. They are Antyaja, i.e., outside the Varna system. The Dalits are called by various other names, namely: Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, Schedule Caste (SC) etc., but Ambedkar termed them as ‘Depressed Class’ (Hans, 2016). Dalits are the community of people who are kept aside as ‘untouchables’ in the society and are subjugated and enforced to perform all the menial and unclean jobs for upper caste people. Dalits are oppressed politically, economically and socially. They are perceived as casteless by the caste people. Even in this modern era, there are discriminations practised in various ways. “They continue to be the victims of caste atrocities – uprooting from their homes; depriving them of their lands; denial of public goods like wells, tanks, temples, hotels, burial grounds etc.” (Hans, 2016, p. 451).

Just as there is a hierarchy in the caste system, there exists hierarchy among the Dalits themselves. They have their own gradations and people who belong to various categories are expected to play specific roles. Their hierarchy is as follows: Valluvar, Pallar, Paraiar, Chakliyar and Puthirai Vannar. The Valluvars being considered as the Brahmins of Dalits and they perform the ritual related activities. The Pallars are the farmers and they engage in cultivation. Parayars do drum beating for marriage and village functions. Chakliyars take away the dead animals and engage in leather related works. Dr. Ambedkar classifies scheduled castes into three categories. The first one is the people considered as untouchables. They cause pollution and make others defiled by their mere touch. The second category of people is labelled as unapproachable. They are Nayadis – the dog eaters. They mostly live in Paalakkad and Tiruchur districts of Kerala. The third category of people is called unseeables. The mere sight of them makes the superior caste people (including the other Dalit groups) defiled.

They are popularly known as Puthirai Vannar or Cheri Vannar (Gopal, 2015). They wash clothes and dress hair for the Dalit community. They are called slum washer men (Cheri Vannar or Puthirai Vannar) (Valan, 2004). These people are considered as 'unseeables'. These people of Puthirai Vannar community are the forgotten group. They are unaddressed and unnoticed.

Puthirai Vannars are addressed by many humiliating terms such as cheri vannar, puratha vannan, puthirai vannar, para vannan, harijan vannan, cheri nesan, iravali puthirai vannan, para eakali, malodu, ahasan, neesan and so on (Valan, 2004). These Puthirai Vannar people are also called as Thurambar. The name 'Thurambar' comes in the list of dirty caste. Thurambar means the people who wash the clothes of pallar, nalavar and parayar (Sanmuhadhas, 1991). Puthirai Vannars are the people who are specifically kept at the outskirts of colony and they form a very minimal number. They are expected to perform all the menial jobs for the other Dalits groups. Added to the degrading traits attributed to them, they are also treated as 'unseeables'. They are considered as the curse to the society and treated without any human dignity. They are denied of education, medicine, all types of livelihood and even the basic right to live as human beings.

Puthirai Vannars, apart from being washer men and barbers for all the scheduled castes, they are also expected to perform other menial duties. Puthirai Vannar is a slave caste to Pallars and Parayars. They are obliged to wash the menstrual clothes of the girls who attained puberty and the clothes of the mother of new born baby. They have to perform the ceremonies for the birth, marriage and death at Dalit homes (Thananjayan, 2014).

The members of the Puthirai Vannar community are thickly populated in many districts of Tamil Nadu. Puthirai vannars don't have a proper place to reside. The other Dalit groups live in colony or 'cheri'. But, the puthirai vannars were never allowed to live with them. They had to go out of the colony and make their residence. "Puthiravannars often live in isolation as outcastes of the outcastes on purambokku (common) land or on the outskirts of Dalit hamlets. Normally they live in small huts with no electricity. As it was once believed that the mere sight of them would pollute the dominant upper castes, the Puthiravannars were shunned by others and hence till recent times they were forced to live as 'Unseeables' (Gopal, 2015).

The caste system had been very particular in limiting the number of Puthirai Vannar families. One or two families only were kept in every 'cheri' or colony to serve the Dalit people. At the most, ten families will be there and not more than that. Usually women of Puthirai Vannar community were involved in collecting the dirty cloths and giving back the ironed clothes. They were also involved in helping during colony festivals. There was no salary system. They were given a little grains and some money that are called 'kothu' as a wage for their services. The heads of the goats that are cut at the colony festival are also the due to puthirai vannar (Laksman & Rahupathi, 2016). Puthirai Vannars are the social rejects among the Dalit people. They are seen as the victims of the victimized people. In caste hierarchy, they are forced to be slaves of the slave castes.

The continuous oppression for several generations has conditioned the community of Puthirai Vannar to be servile. 45% of them are illiterates and 75% of them don't own property. 90% of the families still continue the practice of washing the clothes for Dalits (Gopal, 2015). Moreover there are very few books written about them and still fewer are researches. This is a clear indication that issues related to this group is not been discussed widely by the scientific community. This research attempts to understand the personal and social life of the Puthirai Vannars and aims at bringing out their inner world and their lived experience.

II. METHOD

This research is focused on understanding the inner world of the people of Puthirai Vannar community. For this study, the data were gathered from six people who were the members of Puthirai Vannar community. The participants were personally approached, the reason behind the research was explained and consent for the interview was received. The participants were selected based on the following criteria: They should be members of the Puthirai Vannar community, they should have experienced struggles of caste system, they should be living in the same village for a long period of time and they should be above 50 years. The persons who fit these criteria were chosen. The data were collected through semi-structured interview. Questions were asked to explore the inner world and life experiences of the individuals. Their sharing was carefully recorded with informed consent. The process of the analysis began with transcription of the data. Then the data was translated into English proficiently.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the method adopted for the analysis. This method is very popular in qualitative research. IPA concentrates on how people give meaning to their life experiences. It considers people as 'self-interpreting beings', i.e. people by themselves interpret various events and objects they encounter in their lives. IPA bases itself with the fundamental principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Using the lens of IPA, the text was read and reread several times in order to understand the participants' view of their self and the society. In this process, the researcher carefully identified various emergent themes from the data set. Those themes were noted and arranged systematically. The multiple reading of the data helped in the understanding of the inner psychological world of puthirai vannar

and for procedurally drawing the themes and arranging them consistently. The statements of the participants based on the grouped themes were also identified and organized. The participants were labelled as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 for the analysis. It is to be noted that the further analysis was not made based on the ideas enumerated in the beginning but on the themes emerged from the transcripts.

Validity

Though there are various disputes on the need of validity for the qualitative research, many researchers suggest that there is a need for a kind of qualifying check. The concept of validity in the qualitative research is not single, fixed or universal rather a contingent construct. The validity of the qualitative research is based on the process of research methodologies and projects (Golafshani, 2003). Based on the methodology, the validity was checked by following the procedure. This process begins by checking the internal coherence and the presentation of evidence. Internal coherence is seen by exploring the internal consistency of the data. Accordingly, the other authors went through all the data of the respondents and checked the internal consistency. Sufficient verbatim evidence was also produced for the analysis. The authors discussed on the transcripts and interviews and came out with various themes. Constant check was made by the authors at every level. This process is a way to understand whether the particular analysis has systematically achieved result. Thus the warranty of the data was ensured.

Reflexivity

John Benhar is a catholic priest and has a Masters in Sociology. He is pursuing Masters in Counselling Psychology. Having been exposed to social realities and experienced the struggles of the poor in the society, he developed personal interest in the process of bringing the least noticed social group to the light.

Lidiya Pricilla is pursuing Masters in Counselling Psychology. She has immense interest in working with the marginalised of the society.

Joe Sanjay is a catholic priest and a doctor in Social Organizational Psychology. He have worked with the oppressed communities and personally experienced their life struggles.

Being born in Tamil Nadu, India all the three authors are aware of the caste discrimination that exists in the society especially discrimination towards the Dalit community. The social and academic background of the authors could have had an impact on the analysis of data.

Analysis

This section explores the inner world of Puthirai Vannar community based on the emergent themes of their life situations and experiences. The major themes that emerged were inhuman social practices, denial of human rights, emotional trauma and abuse of women and children.

Inhuman Social Practices

The first theme 'Inhuman Social Practices' brings forth the contextual experiences of Puthirai Vannar people and explains their personal struggle. The practices of the society depict the life they live and the way they are treated by the members. Their sharing elucidated various inhuman practices Puthirai Vannar people are subjected to.

As a norm they are expected to serve the people who belong to the upper Dalit community. As a primary duty, they wash the clothes of Dalit community people for which they are denied of their wages.

I have washed the clothes. I will iron also. We will give the clothes. But they will not give money. If we ask they will not give any proper answer. (P5)

When my father was alive, during my school days, I have gone with my father for washing the clothes. I have done the jobs of boiling the dirty clothes, washing them and ironing those clothes. (P1)

Besides this forced labour, they become objects of ridicule and contempt.

They will say like 'Vannara paiya' (washer man) has come to collect the clothes and they will give me all the dirty clothes to wash. (P3)

Added to that, they have to wash the clothes of the dead, clothes of girls who have attained puberty and clothes of women who have recently delivered.

They will give the clothes of the dead person to us. ...We have to wash properly and give them during the day of remembrance. (P4)

We have washed the puberty clothes. Even during the time of delivery, those clothes were given to us to wash. (P5)

The only wage they receive for all these works is food and not money. Even that has to be begged. They have to beg for food in the morning and evening from the Dalit homes. Though the Puthirai Vannar people have the desire and strength to live normally, they are forced to beg. These communal practices dehumanise them. The cry of those people is expressed as

Whatever they had as remaining will be given to us and we have to get that and come. We have to live only through the food we receive from them; else we have to starve to death. (P3)

We don't know how they give. We have to smile and get whatever they give. ... There are also people who give stale and spoiled food. (P5)

We have to call out like 'Amma give me food'. Then they will give us food. We have accepted the situation because we are used to that. I will call out 'Amma vannathi (Mother, washer woman) has come give some rice'. (P3)

The people of the Dalit community demand them to receive food in order to maintain the system of keeping Puthirai Vannar under their control.

We have to go to all the homes. If we were not going, they would scold us. (P3)

They have to perform various functions at funeral home. They had to arrange the funeral procession and perform the duties at the place of last rite.

For Christians, during death, spreading the saree, and other ceremonies are done still. For Hindus, breaking the pot, burning the body, and putting rice in the mouth of the dead person are done. We have to carry the 'mouth rice' of the dead person. ... We will keep the rice at their entrance of their home. After that, if they are Christians, they will have vehicle to carry the dead body. Coffin will be kept on that vehicle. If they are Hindus, the decorated bamboo bier is arranged. To that a live chicken is also tied. Then the people put rice in the mouth of the dead person. After that, we have to shout that I am going to break the pot. This is done three times. Then we break the pot. (P1)

There are also other duties which Puthirai Vannar people are forced to perform. The major roles are done during marriage, puberty, birth and the village festival. They also play the role of a barber.

When a girl attains puberty, the ladies will apply oil on the girl's body and give her bath. We have to take those clothes, wash and give them back. For the marriages, in 'Nalunku function' (It is a ceremony conducted before the marriage in which sandal will be applied over the face and hands of the bride and bride groom by the family members and relatives. It is widely practiced in Tamil Nadu) we will be there spreading the clothes. (P4)

We are expected to give them haircut. I am very much disturbed about our condition. Since there is no other way, I do all these. (P4)

We have to carry the lamp all through the car precession during village festivals. We do it because it is our duty. (P5)

The participants of this study explained also the other oppressive practices like not allowing them to wear sandals, carry firewood, ride bicycle and take bath in the common well that is meant for everyone.

... We were not allowed to wear sandals or ride bicycle. We were not allowed to carry firewood on the head. ... They can take bath at common well, but we should not. (P4)

These practices have deeply distorted their minds and made them more submissive. It is also to be noted that they were systematically dissipated from the society. A single family was kept in a village to perform all these jobs and they are not allowed to remain in groups. The oppressive structure forbade their togetherness.

... We are the only family living in this colony. We have no support nearby. My brothers are living in other villages. They are also scattered. (P3)

Denial of Human rights

Puthirai Vannars very often remain as social rejects. They are denied of various basic rights. They have to fight with the government officials even for their basic rights. Particularly, in many villages, they have to fight for burying the dead. Till now, proper burial ground is allotted for them. Every time when someone is dead they have to depend on other's mercy. The first participant detailed how he had to struggle to bury his father.

My father died. At that time, we didn't have proper place to burn the body. We had to go to the place of the Arunthathiyar (Arunthathiyar is one of the Dalit communities. They are above the Puthirai Vannars). They created a problem there and the body was kept down. Then, the higher officials like RD and SP came and settled the problem by arranging place for us. Only then we could burn the body. (P1)

Most of the participants pointed out the struggle they had while getting the caste certificate. Though the government gazette explicitly mentions their caste name 'Puthirai Vannar', the officers are not ready to give the certificate with the title 'Puthirai Vannar'. This certificate will be highly beneficial while claiming reservations in jobs and higher education and receiving various government schemes and benefits.

I have received community certificate as Hindu scheduled caste not as washer man or puthirai vannar. When we ask, they say that there is nothing like that. But for my father, it was like Hindu Scheduled caste Vannar. (P1)

The Dalit community is very particular in keeping them landless. Puthirai Vannar people have to live only in the common land (*Purampokku*); the land belonged to the village/ government and no one can own the land. These people are forbidden to own land. They have to struggle hard to register land in their name, even after several decades of stay in the place. The situation at the village is explained as,

Because they didn't give us patta (It is the legal document registered in the name of the person who owns the land or the property), we are residing in the common land. The colony people gave this land. ... We manage to live here for several years. We didn't have the capacity to own the land...They were the ones who will decide where we have to build our home and they allot the land for us to live. If they chase us out we have to move away. (P3)

Due salary for the work which one does is the right of the person. Puthirai Vannar people are not given proper wage for the hard labour. Mostly they are offered food for their service. Some give minimal wage and Puthirai Vannar have no say on their salary. They have to receive whatever is given to them.

If I ask salary for washing clothes, they will scold me. They will devalue the work I have done. They will also instruct me to get what they give and not to ask anything more. (P4)

Emotional Trauma

Experiences of societal degradation and humiliation have made the life of Puthirai Vannar very tragic and pathetic. Their inner world is filled with pain and wounds. The emotional struggle they experience every day makes them feel desperation and meaninglessness. They have a feeling that they are nobody and they have no value. This makes them more submissive and docile. They even feel that God has let them down to suffer in this painful situation. Deep down they grieve over their pathetic condition. The participants of this study expressed their state of desperation in many ways possible.

Earlier I didn't feel anything. When I think of those experiences now, I feel very bad. It pains a lot. (P1)

God has made us like that. It is our fate..... We cannot do anything more. (P4)

Only three families are here. We cannot do anything against them. Several times I have cried about my situation and questioned why God has left me in this inhuman condition. (P5)

Addressing them by their caste name as 'Vannar' (Washer man) or 'Vannathi' (Washer woman) is yet another humiliating act. While addressing them, the Dalits use derogatory terms to put these people down and position them as someone superior. This practice makes them feel depressed and desperate.

They speak well. But while talking, they normally use the word Vannathi. That degrades me. But we cannot question or react. We have to come silently. (P5)

In this village, some will call like ... 'vannara paiya'. It deeply hurts our children. (P2)

In the ceremony, they will simply call by caste name. ... In the marriage function also, on purpose, in front of the crowd, they will call by caste name. They will use all forms of disrespecting words. ... It is a big embarrassment for us. We used to feel why we were born in this caste. (P5)

Despite all humiliations, the people of Puthirai Vannar community continue to survive in the same enslaving atmosphere because of the fear they have for the upper class Dalits. Puthirai Vannars are very fragile and meek, and they are threatened and enslaved very easily by the dominant community. Puthirai Vannar people are very much afraid of physical violence and unsecured residence and thus they live a submissive living in the society.

They oppress and torture us. For fear of this, we have to do whatever they tell us. Out of fear all go to this village jobs. With fear, we have to survive in this society. For fear of being chased from the village, I go to the village jobs mainly for funerals. (P4)

The dehumanising practices and structures trigger anger in the minds of Puthirai Vannars. But they remain subservient for fear of violence towards them and their community.

They will commonly call us '*Vannara paya*' and they will beat us. They will threaten us and say that they will set fire to our homes. They tortured us severely. ... We have no right to ask. We tolerate everything and live. (P3)

I have anger towards them. But we cannot express. ... They may use physical violence. (P5)

This oppression and usage of derogatory words extend even to the God they worship and the religion they belong to. This grieves them.

... For Christmas, they say that washer man God (*Vannar Sammy*) is born. ... Jesus is called as *vannar saamy* and the priest is named as *vannar thurai* (This refers the priests of puthirai vannar community as the lord of the people). When we go to their temple, if we call their gods as *parayar* (This is the name of the dominant Dalit community) *saamy*, will they leave us freely? They will beat and torture us. (P4)

The struggles they undergo make them worry about their present conditions and future life situations. Very particularly, they worry about their future generation and the education of their children.

I am sure that this job will not be there for my children. This should be over with me. ... I was interested in sending them to school and good jobs but it didn't happen. (P2)

We have to educate well. My elder daughter is mentally retarded. The younger one is so smart. I have to educate her well. (P5)

Abuse of Women and Children

The most affected section of the Puthirai Vannar people are women and children. Women are greatly tortured by the upper class Dalit communities and also by the male members of Puthirai Vannar community. They have to face inter-communal and intra-communal oppression. Even the children of this community face struggles related to casteism.

When my daughters were going to the school, some people used bad words and mocked at them. Some even called them as 'Ai kutti' (dirty girl - degrading term to call girls). (P1)

My girls are studying. We are afraid of the situation and send them to school. There is no proper security to them... We are afraid of bringing up our girls. (P5)

Another participant painfully narrated the cry of the young child and the insensitivity of the upper class Dalit people.

My younger daughter has several times asked us crying 'what is vannar?'. Whenever she goes out they used to mock at her like 'vannara ponnu' (Washer man's daughter). She will ask 'aren't we similar then why do they call us like that'. Even teachers have said like that. (P5)

There are many tortures and humiliations that the women folk of Puthirai Vannar community go through. The major one is the sexual abuse. One of the participants detailed the abuse happened to his only daughter.

My girl child will not speak and walk. Once, a boy from Dalit community entered my home when there was nobody, attempted rape. Subsequently my girl died. The girl is handicapped. She cannot move her hands and legs. ... Due to this we don't have much contact with the villagers. (P3)

Enslavement, oppression and abuse have become an indispensable part in the life of the Puthirai Vannar community. Inhuman social practices, denial of human rights, subjection to emotional trauma and abuse of women and children were the major threads shared by the participants while they narrated their personal experience of being part of an oppressed community.

III. DISCUSSION

Social discriminations commonly degrade and enslave people. Caste system encourages this type of division in the society and ardently upholds inequality. The group that faces the brunt of these abuses greatly is the Puthirai Vannar community. In Tamil Nadu down the ages they are treated as slaves by the upper class Dalits and they had to do menial jobs in other Dalit homes.

Prejudice is a negative emotional response towards a particular social group, and when it is transformed into behaviour it becomes discrimination. When the prejudiced ideas are transmitted it is projected as though they are legal and justified. This convinces the members of the dominant group to get into discriminatory practice (Bressey, 2012). Prejudice and discrimination towards this Puthirai Vannar community is a practice that has been on for centuries. They are handed down from one generation to another. The dominant groups propagate justification regarding these practices, and as a result those belonging to the upper Dalit groups get in to the phase of moral disengagement that they distance themselves from normal ethical standards of behaviour and support unethical and discriminatory behaviours (Anant, 1970).

The sad part of the story is that even after the emergence of the Anti-Discrimination and Equality Bill 2016, discrimination is still practiced. People are aware of this social evil. Some condemn these divisive factors while many consciously or unconsciously uphold the system. Social identity theory could explain this behaviour. It suggests that human beings categorize people into 'in group' and 'out group'. They identify themselves with 'in group' members and develop antagonistic attitude and behaviour towards the 'out group' members. This 'in group' identification boosts the self-esteem of the individual and leads to intolerance and discrimination towards members of the out group (Jenkins, 1994). Since the Dalit group as a whole are treated as an 'out group' by the people of other castes, they experience inferiority and low self-esteem. So as to handle this esteem issue and feel better they categorize themselves as 'in group' and 'out group'. Here the other Dalit groups see themselves as 'in group' and treat the Puthirai Vannar community as 'out group' and thus they become target of prejudice and discrimination.

The Puthirai Vannar community handles the issue of discrimination in two ways. One group accepts their status and go on with the work assigned to them and the other group aspires and struggles for a just society.

Some of them have accepted discrimination and consider the works that are allotted for them as their responsibility. Tasks like carrying lantern for the car procession during village festivals or doing menial jobs are seen as duties that they do for the community. Since they are sure that the oppressive structure could not be challenged or changed they have made up their mind to accept it (Rath, & Sircar, 2015).

It is our duty. So we do. It is a common affair... This we have to do for coming generations... Abolishing this is presently not possible. (P5)

Moreover human beings have a need to belong to and be accepted by a social group. This need for affiliation is a major drive for human existence (Bernstein, & Claypool, 2012). It is also this drive for affiliation makes them volunteer for any degrading task.

There is yet another group among them who still after experiencing all these social discriminations strive to be treated as equals in the society. In spite of the verbal and physical abuse they still make efforts to establish a just society (Rath, & Sircar, 2015).

I feel that I am not here to do the servile job. I should do other works. We have to change this condition. (P4)

This is a clear indication of upward social mobility where the individuals try to move up the social ladder towards a status that is more valuable and respected (Jenkins, 1994). This upward mobility is not a very natural and smooth. It always accompanies pain and struggle. Apart from wealth and position there are many other factors that play an important role in preventing this mobility. Caste discrimination is one such factor that hinders the upward mobility. The oppressed group has to struggle and find its way up.

Added to the social exclusion, political exclusion play a major role in discrimination. Puthirai Vannars are politically and socially excluded from the main stream society. They are denied of their basic human rights as citizens of India. The denial of governmental schemes, burial ground, caste certificate and the ownership of land are evidence for this social and political exclusion. This political and communal system keeps them dependent, subservient and compliant. As a result of this exclusion they experience psychological distress and cognitive deconstruction, where they experience meaninglessness, avoid meaningful thoughts and emotions, and become emotionally passive and lethargic (Bernstein, & Claypool, 2012).

The continuous communal struggles and humiliations have lead them to emotional trauma. They go through myriad of emotions from frustration to anger, helplessness to fear.

The participants have gone through moments of helplessness where they felt that they are nobody and they could do nothing to change their condition. Those who went through this state of helplessness accepted their state as a fate. They felt that there is none to help or uplift them and they accepted their situation as a fate that has to be lived.

The God has created like this. We cannot change the fate of the person. (P6)

These behaviours could be explained by attribution theory. To go on with one's life one should make sense of one's life and life events. Individuals try to attribute the cause behind their life events to something or someone (Weiner, 1986). This sense making helps them move on.

The inhuman treatments they go through makes them feel that their life is worthless. What disturbs and worries them all the more is the thought about the safety of their girl children. They also live in constant fear. They are often subjected to violence and threats and this has caused the feeling of insecurity. They are expected to maintain the unjust social system that is in practice. The system expects them to be dependent on the upper class Dalits even for their basic survival. They have to be dependent of others for food, money, residence and other basic needs. When this status quo is disturbed they are subjugated to violence. Thus they live their everyday life in fear and insecurity.

When we analyse this condition of Puthirai Vannars through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs we would be able to understand that none of their needs were met. They are deprived of basic physical and safety needs - they have to eat their food by begging and they lack proper residence. They are treated as outcasts and they are excluded from social forum. Such acts of discrimination targeted towards them deprive them of their belongingness need. They don't feel part of any social group. In spite of their hard labour for the upper class Dalits they are not appreciated or treated with respect. Added to that, they are humiliated and mocked at in public. This destroys their self-esteem and leaves them with shame and disgrace. As a result they experience inferiority complex and lack self-esteem and thus they are deprived of their esteem needs. When these needs are not met there is no possibility for them to reach the phase of self-actualisation. Maslow states that if the needs of the individuals are not met then they may develop physical and mental health issues (Lester, 1990).

The most affected ones in the Puthirai Vannar community are the women and children. Women are the victimised lot. While the Puthirai Vannar men experience double discrimination one from the hands of the upper caste people and the other from the other Dalit groups, the Puthirai Vannar women experience triple discrimination - added to the above two forms of discrimination, they are discriminated by their own men folk. The women of Puthirai Vannar community are very often seen as sexual objects by the higher caste people. They have to fight hard to protect themselves. They develop poor self-concept and self-image.

Childhood experiences are the key factors for a healthy personality. Environment plays an important role in the development of personality. If the child is constantly exposed to an insecure and threatening environment it will have an impact on the child's self-concept, and self-esteem and it may affect cognitive, emotional and motivational attributes (Erikson, 1977). The children of the Puthirai Vannar community are exposed to social discrimination and humiliation. They see their parents being treated as objects of ridicule and contempt. They also experience discrimination and humiliation both in the village and the school.

My daughters are studying. The other community people will mock at my daughters' intelligence and capacity to study. (P1)

Such experiences make them feel inferior. These early experiences will certainly distort their personality and impede their development.

Limitations

This research focused on the specific group of people called Puthirai Vannar. Though the population is spread out across the state of Tamil Nadu, samples were chosen from only one district. Selection of samples from various parts of Tamil Nadu would have given a broader understanding of the issues the community is experiencing. Though the data collected through interview were processed with the help of experts, there is a possibility for misinterpretation of the view of the participants during the transcribing and translating process. It may have limited the real meaning and expression of the inner world of the participants. Moreover the gender of the participants was the same and it could have resulted in a male oriented narration.

Future Research

Future researchers may gather data from Puthirai Vannar community living in different pockets of Tamil Nadu. The sample could be more heterogeneous including women, youth and children. The sample size could be increased and other forms of data gathering namely survey method and Focus Group Discussion could be employed. Since it is explicit that the Puthirai Vannars go through issues such as emotional trauma, inferiority complex, low self-esteem and other mental health problems, an intervention study could be done to help them overcome their personal struggles.

IV. CONCLUSION

The understanding of the inner world of people of puthirai vannar community was a painful process. Communal discrimination, political and social exclusion, violence and threat, verbal and physical abuses and forced inhuman labour that were practiced for generations have left a permanent scar in their lives. Though prejudice and discrimination towards this group has relatively come down, discrimination do exists in subtler forms in cities and blatantly in the villages. Even in this era the Puthirai Vannar people find it difficult to live a life of dignity and respect. Structural change demands an attitudinal change from the part of the people. There is a dire need to educate our people regarding values of love, justice, equality and fraternity. This study is one such attempt to understand the inner struggles of the puthirai vannar community and make their voices heard. We would like to thank all the participants who generously spent time with us, cooperated very well and contributed the data for this study.

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