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TAMIL NADU

‘Samathuvapuram’: Towards Spatial Equality

The concept of housing communities, where dalits and people of other castes live together in mixed neighbourhoods and share all facilities – focuses for the first time on social and cultural equality in housing programmes. The plan itself germinated in response to recurrent caste and communal clashes in the state and has received considerable acceptance among the public.

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Historically, social inequalities have persisted in the caste Hindu structure and that continue to this day. Caste discrimination has existed not only in the form of social hierarchy but also in the location of habitations. Sheltering patterns of the so-called untouchables were such as to keep them separated from the mainstream society denying them civic amenities and other services available to the others. In fact, the settlements itself was evidence of these inequalities. For instance, the dalit settlements were/are located invariably in the downstream of the villages, which is insanitary in all possible manner. The widely quoted GO of the Madras Presidency (No 1010 and 1010(A)) on the socio-economic conditions of the Chingelput pariahs (1892) describes their poor living

conditions: “...always badly nourished; clad, if at all, in the vilest of rags; eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases; huddled like pigs; untaught; uncared for, and unpitied”. These conditions persisted in various parts of the Madras Presidency till independence. Several social movements had attempted to eradicate these inequalities, without much success. Neither the pre-colonial rulers nor the colonial administrators initiated any constructive attempts to eradicate these social inequalities, particularly in terms of their habitations.

Since independence, both the union and state governments have initiated several measures to establish social equality among various social groups/communities. These measures can be classified into two broad categories – protective and promotional. Protective measures include several constitutional safeguards, acts and ordinances.

Promotional measures consist of specific schemes and programmes. Broadly speaking, the former is an indirect strategy and the latter a direct one. However, several studies have found that the protective and promotional measures had not produced expected results, by way of establishing equality among different social groups. Though individual social groups have attained development, differences/discrimination between the groups still persist on several grounds. A dalit settlement is one such widely prevalent discriminatory practice in most of the rural Tamil Nadu. Several housing schemes have been initiated for dalits but these are located far away from the main residential area. Of course, dalits are no longer "huted like pigs", and their housing conditions have improved but the problem of untouchability still persists. Government programmes and policies in general are not bold enough to address such discrimination directly, that is, they never attempted to build the 'adi dravidar' houses in the midst of other dominant communities or vice versa. In the early 1990s, Tamil Desiya Pothuvudamai Katchi (Tamil Nationalist Socialist Party) and its leading functionaries, P Maniyarasan, Rajendra Cholan and Yoganathan, opposed the creation of 'colonies' and demanded collective housing where dalits could live among others. The government, however, failed to respond. The 'samathuvapuram' (equality village) housing scheme initiated by the Tamil Nadu government during the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under chief minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi, broke out of this mould.

Housing Policies and Missing Social Dimension Linkages

Government housing policies and schemes had confined themselves till recently to the economic dimension ignoring the social and cultural implications of housing. The spatial separation of housing settlements due to social exclusion on caste lines may cut off communication, interaction with other communities and sustain practices of social exclusion and untouchability. Thus, housing, in its broadest connotation, encompasses not only shelter, economic services and facilities, but also a harmonious social environment, conducive neighbourhood and peaceful coexistence necessary not only to build social capital but also to develop to human well-being. Since independence, the government had provided housing facilities

for the untouchables in exclusively isolated places of the main village or at the outskirts of small towns. In other words, the government policies had not considered the integration of untouchable communities with mainstream communities.

However, the DMK government initiated housing policies whereby all communities could live together in the village and share all civic and other infrastructure facilities. Lower castes, higher castes and those 'in between' were to live together in equal comfort, self-respect, and dignity with mutual respect and interaction. Thus 'social equality', which is a fundamental need to establish equality in a caste-ridden society, could be attempted through the housing schemes. Karunanidhi launched one such housing scheme to establish social equality through spatial equality by the creation of model villages called samathuvapuram.

A Model Village

The samathuvapuram housing scheme was introduced in 1997 with Rs 35 crore to establish 100 samathuvapurams in different parts of Tamil Nadu. The plan was to create model villages in rural areas with free housing and other facilities wherein people of different castes and religions could live together and share civic amenities and services without caste discrimination or differential treatment. This scheme was named Periyar 'Ninaivu samathuvapuram', after Periyar E V Ramasamy Naicker, a social revolutionary of the Dravidian movement of the early 20th century. In fact, Periyar opposed the existence and creation of 'cheries' and introduced the concept of samathuvapuram. In order to eradicate caste discrimination and untouchability, he proposed several action plans, like inter-caste marriage, inter-dining and common dwelling. He also suggested that all communities should live together to fight against exploitation.

In rural areas, caste discrimination practices prevail visibly and invisibly in various forms. Habitation area, roads, access to basic amenities like water, roads, temple and burial ground are some of the areas through which 'pure' and 'impure' are demarcated in the name of caste. Caste in the traditional villages determines the choice of location for habitation. Almost invariably, the habitation area of each caste is separated from that of the other by a greater or lesser distance based on the degree of purity or otherwise of a particular caste.

In Tamil Nadu, cheries, 'nagars' and 'agraharams' are popular habitation areas respectively for dalits, caste Hindus, and brahmins.

Post-colonial government policies have not encouraged integration of different settlements. On the contrary, they have encouraged segregation indirectly by passive silence about such inequalities. The government, of course, allotted lands/built 'cluster houses'/'group houses' under various special schemes for the dalits and all such efforts have changed only the nomenclature from cheries to colonies. However, the social and spatial distance between the nagar and colony has not been bridged. In other words, colonies are nothing but government-sponsored cheries, still at the outskirts of the village without any free access to the nagar and its civic amenities.

The first samathuvapuram was established at Melakottai village of Madurai district and 100 houses were built at a cost of Rs 35,000 each. The houses are constructed on 5-cent plots with a built-in area of 259 sq ft with facilities. The beneficiaries have been selected on the basis of income criteria from eight adjacent villages of Melakottai. Of the 100 beneficiaries, 40 are adi-dravidars, 25 houses have been allotted to backward classes, 25 to most backward classes and 10 to people of other communities. The allotment is done in the name of the female member of the household. That is, the 'patta' (title deed) is given in the name of the woman (such as the wife of the head of the household). This, in a way, promotes entitlement and empowerment of women. The samathuvapuram consists of water tanks, community hall, primary school, library, health centre, fair price shop, noon meal centre, recreation centre, park and playground. The government also provides the deposit for electricity connection to each house. The entire construction work was handed over to the Tamil Nadu State Construction Corporation, with emphasis on the quality of construction. Expenditure towards construction is met from a special grant from the government. Expenditure towards basic amenities like roads, street lights, drainage and drinking water is provided by the respective departments and local bodies through convergence of ongoing programmes.

The site for the scheme is identified by the district collector either from available government lands or acquired from private parties. After a proper layout, a patta

is assigned to the beneficiaries, and sites/houses are allotted at random so that families from different communities live together as neighbours. A committee headed by the district revenue officer selects the beneficiaries in consultation with local bodies from nearby areas within a radius 10 km. Facilities provided for the samathuvapuram include town bus from the city, with stop-over facility by all buses plying on the national highway. Post office and telephone facilities are also being provided. Additionally, a dairy farm is being set up, with 30 inhabitants to be provided with milch cows. A scheme to extend loan facility to provide self-employment for young people at the samathuvapuram is also envisaged. The district collector has obtained a written document/undertaking from each family not to install statues of religious or community leaders, not to sell or pledge houses for 15 years, accept using a common burial ground, not to create separate places of worship, not to consume liquor, not to let the houses on rent, maintain hygiene and an agreement that the property will be taken over by the government if rules are violated.

Initially the validity of the samathuvapuram concept was challenged. However, Karunanidhi responded by saying that it was not the claim of the government that caste-related problems could be eliminated by this scheme. "The deep-rooted caste and communal differences cannot be eliminated overnight. They exist despite agitation by Gandhiji, Rajaji and others. However, the government realised that some concrete steps would have to be taken to prevent caste and communal clashes, as the recurrence of such clashes would lead to law and order problems, which are detrimental to development and welfare activities." He also said, "My wish is that the entire district should become a samathuvapuram and the entire state and above all the entire nation and the world should become a samathuvapuram".

However, the initial criticism disappeared gradually and the scheme has come up with striking results. So far, 150 samathuvapurams have been created in several districts and about 15,000 rural households have benefited. Though it may not be sufficient to meet the actual rural housing requirements in Tamil Nadu, as a concept the samathuvapuram has received the total acceptance of the public. A field report observed that "the concept of peaceful coexistence, transcending caste and religious walls, as envisaged through the Tamil

Nadu government's samathuvapuram scheme is taking a concrete shape in the clash-torn southern districts, despite its shortcomings and post-project bureaucratic apathy. The spirit behind the scheme has been well taken by the people who are slowly coming out of their caste cocoon" ('Samathuvapurams: Breaking Caste Cocoons' by S Annamalai in *The Hindu*, December 10, 1999). The report also brought out some of the shortcomings of the scheme at the implementation level, like quality of houses, misuses like subletting, and political interference in the identification of beneficiaries. However, these minor shortcomings could be rectified through a complete evaluation and proper monitoring of the scheme. The scheme has been appreciated by the Mohan Commission, which was set up to look into and suggest remedies for the scourge of caste clashes in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

All these developments have implications for our national housing policy, which has long focused exclusively on an economic dimension. Until recently, rural housing schemes have not paid attention to spatial and social inequality. The problem of rural housing had so far been addressed only through wage employment programmes like the National Rural Employment Programme, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme and Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, with a small housing component in them. The Indira Awaas Yojana (aided self-help) has been de-linked from JRY and has been made an independent scheme with effect from January 1, 1996. So far, housing schemes had not attempted to establish social/spatial equality. Some of the existing schemes can also be redesigned with minor modifications in their guidelines to address the issue. This requires no additional expenditure, but only a strong political will and commitment.

The concept of samathuvapuram is certainly a pioneering effort, not only in terms of promoting rural housing but also in establishing spatial equality, social harmony and social capital. However, it is unfortunate that the scheme has been relegated to the background, because of the change of government in Tamil Nadu. Unless there is a change in the mindset of the political parties, attempts to eradicate social inequality would be in vain. **EW**

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