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Towards 'Spatial' Equality: *Samathuvapuram* in Tamil Nadu

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Historically, social inequalities have persisted in the caste Hindu structure and they continue even now in different parts of the Indian sub-continent 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 kept away to keep them separated from the mainstream society which led to denial of all civic amenities and other services which were available to the rest.

For instance, the *dalit* settlements were/are located, invariably in the downstream of the villages, which is unsanitary in all possible means. The widely quoted G.O. of the Madras Presidency [No.1010 and 1010(A)] on the socio-economic conditions of the Chingelput *Paraiahs* (1892) describe their poor living conditions : " always badly nourished; clad, if at all, in the vilest of rags; eaten up with leprosy or other horrible diseases; hutted like pigs; untaught; uncared for, and unpitied".

Similar conditions had persisted and continued in the different parts of the Madras Presidency till independence. However, several social movements had attempted to eradicate these inequalities, but they had not produced the expected results over the period. Neither the pre-colonial rulers nor the colonial administrators had 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 the social equality among the different social groups/communities. These measures could be classified into two broad categories-protective and promotional. The protective measures include several constitutional safeguards, acts and ordinances.

The promotional measures consist of several specific schemes and programmes. Broadly speaking, the former is an indirect one and the latter direct one. However, several studies found that the protective measures had not produced the expected results, while the promotional measures also had failed to establish equality among the different social groups.

Though the individual social groups have attained development, the differences/discrimination between the groups' still persists on several grounds. *Dalit* settlement is one such widely prevalent discrimination in most of the rural Tamil Nadu. Several housing schemes have been initiated for the *dalits* but they were located at a separate place far away from the main residential area. Of course, *dalits* are no more 'huddled like pigs' and their housing conditions have improved to some extent but the problem of untouchability still persists between the caste Hindus and the Dalits.

But the government programmes and policies in general are not bold enough to address such discrimination directly i.e. they never attempted to built the *Adi Dravidar* houses in the midst of other dominant communities or vice versa. Instead, the government built *Adi-Dravidar* 'colonies' in exclusive isolated places away from the main habitations.

During early nineties, *Tamil Desiya Pothuvudamai Katchi* (Tamil Nationalist Socialist Party) and its leading functionaries P. Maniyarasan, Rajendra Cholan and Yoganathan have opposed the

creation of 'colonies' that too by the government and demanded collective housing where *dalits* can live in midst of others. The government, however, responded with a deep silence and maintained the spatial distance between the *dalits* and the rest. The *Samathuvapuram* (Equality Village) housing scheme initiated by the Tamil Nadu Government during the Diravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under the then Chief Ministership of Muthuvel Karunanithi had really broken such deliberate 'silence'.

Housing Policies and Missing Social Dimension Linkages

Further, the government housing policies and schemes had confined, till recently, to the economic dimension alone and ignored the social and cultural implications of housing. The spatial separation of housing settlement due to social exclusion on caste lines may cut off communication, interaction with the other communities and sustain the different forms of social exclusion practices and untouchability.

Thus, housing in its broadest connotation, encompasses not only shelter, economic services and facilities but also harmonious social environment, conducive neighbourhood and peaceful coexistence, which are necessary not only to build social capital but also to improve human wellbeing. The housing schemes have not attempted, till late 1990s, to integrate the segregated untouchable caste settlements along with the other sections.

Since independence, the post-colonial government had provided housing facilities for the untouchables but in exclusively isolated places of the main village or at the outskirts of small towns. In other words, the government policies had not thought about the integration of the untouchable communities with the mainstream communities.

However, the DMK government had initiated housing policies, where all the communities could live together in the village without any discrimination and share all the civic and other infrastructure facilities. Lower caste, higher caste and those who are 'in-between' must live together in equal comfort, self-respect, and above all with dignity, mutual respects and interaction.

Thus 'social equality', which is a fundamental need to establish equality in the caste-ridden society, could be attempted through the housing schemes. M. Karunanithi launched one such housing scheme to establish social equality through spatial equality by the creation of model villages called *Samathuvapurams*.

Periyar *Ninaivu Samathuvapuram* : A Model Village

Samathuvapuram housing scheme was introduced in 1997 with Rs.35 crores to establish one hundred *Samathuvapurams* in different parts of Tamil Nadu. The idea behind the scheme is the creation of model villages in rural areas with free housing and other facilities wherein people of different castes and religions can live together and share civic amenities and services without any caste discrimination / differential treatment.

This scheme was named as Periyar *Ninaivu Samathuvapuram*, remembering Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, a great social revolutionary of the Dravidian movement in the early twentieth century in the erstwhile Madras Presidency. In fact, Periyar opposed the existence and creation of '*cheries*' and introduced the concept of *Samathuvapuram* during the early twentieth century. In order to eradicate caste discrimination and untouchability, he proposed several action plans like inter- caste marriage, inter-dinning and common dwelling. He suggested that all the communities should live together to fight against the different forms of exploitation. Throughout his life,

he waged a war against irrational beliefs, faiths, casteism and atrocities perpetuated on lower castes and weaker sections. Hence, the scheme has been named after him.

In the rural areas, caste discrimination practices prevail visibly and invisibly in one or the other form. 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*

The post-colonial government policies have not encouraged the integrity of the different settlements of people in the same place. On the contrary, they have encouraged the segregation indirectly by its 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 the 'government sponsored *cheries*' still at the outskirts of the village without any free access to *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.35000 each. The houses are constructed on 5-cent plots with a built in area of 259 sq.ft with all facilities. The beneficiaries have been selected on

the basis of income criteria (i.e., poverty line) from the eight adjacent villages of Melakottai. Of the 100 beneficiaries, 40 houses have been allotted to Adi-Dravidars 25 to backward classes, 25 to most backward classes and 10 to people of other communities. Again, 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 (e.g. wife of the Head of the Household). This, in a way, promotes entitlement and empowerment of women.

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, laying emphasis on the quality of construction. Expenditure towards construction is met from a special grant from government. The expenditure towards basic amenities like roads, street lights, drainage and drinking water are provided by the respective departments and local bodies through convergence of ongoing programmes.

The site for the scheme is identified by District Collector either from available government lands or acquired from private parties. After a proper layout, *patta* is assigned to the beneficiaries; the sites/houses are allotted at random, so that families from different communities live together as neighbours. A committee headed by District Revenue Officer selects the beneficiaries in consultation with the local bodies from the nearby areas within 10 km radius.

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 for the self-employment of youth at the *Samathuvapuram* is also envisaged.

The District Collector has obtained a written document/undertaking from each family not to install the statues of religious or community leaders, not to sell or pledge the houses for a period of 15 years, acceptance to use a common burial ground, not to create separate places of worship, not to consume liquor, not to let the houses on rent, keep everything hygienic and an agreement that the property be taken over by the government, if any rules are violated.

At the earlier stage, the validity of the *Samathuvapuram* concept has been challenged. However, the then Chief Minister responded that it was not the claim of the government that caste-related problems could be abolished 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'. Further, he stated: 'My wish is that the entire district should become a *Samathuvapuram* and not alone that, 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 came out with striking results. So far 150 *Samathuvapurams* have been created in various districts of the state and about 15,000 rural households have been benefited. Though it may not be sufficient

to meet the actual rural housing requirements in Tamil Nadu, as a concept *Samathuvapuram* is indeed admirable and 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'¹.

The report also brought out some of the shortcomings of the scheme at the implementation level like quality of the houses, misuses like subletting and political interference in the identification of beneficiaries. However, all these minor shortcomings could be rectified through a complete evaluation and proper monitoring of the scheme. The scheme has been appreciated by Mohan Commission, which was asked to enquire and suggest remedies for the scourge of caste clashes in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

All these have implications for our national housing policy, which has long focused exclusively on an economic dimension alone. Until recently, rural housing schemes have not given any attention to spatial and social inequality. Rural housing problem so far had been addressed only through wage employment programmes like National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) and Jawahar Rozhar Yojana (JRY) with a small housing component in them. Then Indira Awaas Yojana (aided self-help) has been de-linked from JRY and has been made an independent scheme with effect from 1st January 1996. In short, so

far, the 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 mainly 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.

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