

The Social Status of the Tannery Workers in Dindigul – A Subaltern Perspective

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The Leather Industries in Tamil Nadu is primarily in the organized sector comprising tanning and finishing, footwear and footwear components, leather garments, leather goods including bags, wallets, belts, gloves and accessories, saddler and harness articles. Main production units are located at Chennai, Ranipet, Melvisharam, Ambur, Vaniyambadi, Pernambut, Trichy, Erode and Dindigul in Tamil Nadu. The Leather Industry in Dindigul has earned a special status in the Dindigul economy. It also gives a vast employment opportunity to the people of Dindigul. At the time of the Advent of the British, this industry became more organized, especially, to meet the defense requirements of the British Empire in India. In the year 1966, leather and allied industries in Dindigul formed one of the main activities of the rural sector. In Dindigul today, with the emphasis of export of finished leathers, the industry is mainly in the hands of small and organized sector. So, in order to earn more foreign exchange, the leather industry should be developed, which can be possible only by improving the socio-economic conditions of tannery workers and empowering them to take part in the activities and performance of the organization.

This paper has been mainly focus to study the social status of the workers in tannery only. Social study is the relationship between economic activity and social life. It is a relatively new social science that has emerged as a separate field of study in the late twentieth century. The tannery workers are invariably drawn from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and poorer sections of the Backward Classes. Still the fact is that most of the workers belong to socially and economically backward communities of the Dindigul. Social conditions of the tannery workers in Dindigul district is ascertained through both the primary and secondary data obtained from them. The questionnaire is considered as an instrument to obtain the responses from the tannery workers. Inspire of the difficulties in the way of defining the term a general idea of standard of living can be had, perhaps, the

idea can be best expressed by saying that the standard of living refers to the amount of necessities, comforts and luxuries which a person consumes.

The surveys and enquiries made in this respect provide a comprehensive data regarding the standard of living of the industrial workers in the country, though on account of difference in condition of work and wages from centre to centre and from industry to industry. It becomes impossible to arrive at any conclusion. With context to the leather industry at Dindigul the personnel visit made by the researcher reveals that the causes of low standard of living of these workers are manifold. The main cause of low standard of living of the workers is low income and high cost of living. The researcher came to know through the interviews with the workers of this industry that workers were not getting sufficient wages to make up their livelihood.³ As the structure of this industry is somewhat unorganized the employers exploit the workers by paying nominal wages.

The workers employed in big units are getting the wages as per the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act but still it does not suffice as such a marked decline is observed in their standard of living.⁴ A comparison between the cost of living and of the working class of this industry reveals that the standard of living has fallen to the extent of disparity between the proportional increase of wage and index numbers. The interval of six months which has not been and is not in a capacity to compensate for the increase in the rise in the general price level and the cost of living, as a consequence the ultimate burden falls on the standard of living of the workers as a whole. In Dindigul demographic characteristics refer to selected population characteristics as used in Government, marketing or opinion research, or the demographic profiles used in such research.⁵

Commonly-used demographic characteristics include gender, age, educational status, marital status, family status, monthly income, and number of dependents in the family, job position, job experience and working hours per day. According to marketing dictionary, "Demographics refer to population or consumer statistics regarding Socio-economic factors, such as age, income, sex, occupation, education, family size, and the like." Thus, demographics are a very important aspect of media planning in matching the media with the market. Each demographic category is broken down according to its characteristics. According to Small Business Encyclopedia, "Demographics are the

statistical characteristics of human populations, such as, age and income that are used by businesses to identify markets for their goods and services.

Demography is the study of the structure of human population using records of the numbers of the births, deaths, instances of disease etc.⁶ Analysis of these demographic characteristics is often undertaken in conjunction with so-called lifestyle factors. Studies of these factors will be very much helpful in determining the socio-economic conditions of tannery workers, because analysis indicates a high correlation between certain lifestyle characteristics of tannery workers.¹ The demographic characteristics play a major role in ascertaining the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of workers in any industry. In particular, gender, age, educational status, marital status, family status and monthly income are vital in determining the characteristic features of the tannery workers and their respective segmentation. Besides, the organizational variables, such as, number of dependents, job position, job experience and working hours are useful in identifying the organizational factors influencing the workers.⁷

The Male and Female difference among the tannery workers classifies the to know their potentiality, knowledge and accomplishment. The gender bias, job suitability, job position and other things are essential to motivate and empower the tannery workers. It is interesting to note that the majority of the tannery workers are only Male workers; and only a smaller quantity of Female workers are willing to perform their job in the tanneries.⁸ The study of Age composition is helpful in determining the Socio-economic Conditions and Empowerment of tannery workers. The earning capacity of the family depends upon the composition of Age. If the more members of the family fall in the working Age group, the possibility of the earning of the family is high.

The classification of tannery workers according to their Age.⁹ It reveals that 21.4 percent of tannery workers are less than 25 years; 40.5 percent tannery workers dominate between the Age group 26 to 35 years; 26 percent tannery workers are between the Age group 36 to 45 years; and 12.1 percent are more than 45 years of Age. It is inferred that 66.5 percent of the work force is in the Age group of 26 to 45 years. In a developing country like India, Education is the root cause for economic growth. Educations are the first step towards the eradication of super studious ideas and pass missive thoughts. Education level is an increasingly important factor, as technology becomes more

important to day-to-day living. Generally, the more education a person has, the greater the income he earns; thus, the more money he has to purchase his day to day needs.¹⁰ Education is most often measured by level of schooling completed. As a rule of thumb, college-educated people are among the most desirable tannery workers. But studies show that they also tend to be the least among the tannery workers.

Educational qualification is an index of social status indispensable for improving the socio-economic conditions of tannery workers. Education is not only a basis for acquiring knowledge, but also getting livelihood. Most of the tannery workers do not have higher education.¹¹ Even though getting a job in a tannery as a worker is not required any educational qualification, educational status is one of the indices of standard of living. 93 percent of tannery workers have studied at the School level. It shows that the majority of tannery workers have studied only up to the School level education. 6.1 percent of tannery workers have studied up to Under-graduate level.

Marriage is also one of the predominant factors which determine the socio-economic conditions of tannery workers. After marriage, there are additions in the family, which will increase both income and expenditure. Increase in expenditure motivates the family members to seek additional income. 75.4 percent tannery workers are married and 23.1 percent of them are unmarried. 1.5 percent tannery workers are widows. There are no widower tannery workers.¹² The nature of the family of the tannery workers is another factor that determines the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of them. Though there are advantages of earning more income and division of labour in Joint-Family system. There is a danger of disguised unemployment when compared with Nuclear Family. Joint-Family can have more members to work and earn their livelihood. Simultaneously their expenditure also increases. Most of the tannery workers are living with Joint-Family (61.7 percent) comparing to the Nuclear Family, which falls only 38.3 percent. It shows that majority of the tannery workers are willing to live with Joint-Family. The total Number of Dependents in each family reflects the socio-economic conditions and Empowerment of tannery workers.¹³

The larger the number of men in the family, the social status of the family will be high. Most of the tannery workers have more number of dependents depending on them. Among the various factors which are influencing the socio-economic conditions and

empowerment of tannery workers, Level of Income is the most significant one. The Level of Income determines the level of consumption and standard of living of the tannery workers. Savings and Investment potential of tannery workers are determined only by the level of income. In general, income tends to increase with age, as people obtain better-paying jobs and obtain promotions.¹⁴ The income of tannery workers is not also a constant one, because the income is based on the number of working days attended in the month by the workers.

Majority of tannery workers (72.1 percent) are earning a Monthly Income of less than Rs. 3,000. 25 percent of tannery workers are earning Monthly Income between Rs. 3,001 to Rs. 6,000. Only a limited percentage of workers (2.2 percent) are earning between Rs. 6,001 to Rs. 9,000 and a meager percentage of workers (0.7 percent) are earning between Rs. 9,001 to Rs. 12,000. It is interesting to note that there is no worker getting monthly income of more than Rs. 12,000. Maximum number of tannery workers (72.1 percent) earning low income; and they suffer from the lower standard of living.¹⁵ The suffering arises because of no increment in their wages; and there is increase in the price of commodities which they daily consume.² So, the tannery workers are normally living under lower standard of living.

The job Position also determines the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of tannery workers, because salaries, wages and other amenities are provided to them according to their Job Position. The supervisors and technicians will be given some extra salaries comparing to the wages given to the laborers and operators. The role of tannery workers is very much indispensable in every tannery.¹⁶ Therefore, they must be protected, their socio-economic conditions should be improved and they must be empowered with proper authority and responsibility to discharge their duties regularly, efficiently and effectively. 68 percent of tannery workers are working as laborer, 15.5 percent working as Operator, 13.8 percent working as Supervisor, and 2.7 percent working as technician. It is interesting to note that laborers are more in the tanneries comparing to other category workers.

Job Experience is also indispensable to know the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of tannery workers, because it is the experience that determines the scale of pay. The scale of pay of the tannery workers will increase in accordance with the

experience of them. The economical status of the tannery workers will improve only when their income increases.¹⁷ Apart from the usual pay, other facilities, such as provident fund, Employees' State Insurance, Gratuities, Life Insurance and other benefits are provided to the workers based on their experience only. Whatever is the job one does, excellence only will result in improvement. Excellence in a job will come only when one undergoes proper and systematic training and sufficient experience. 34.2 percent tannery workers have less than 3 years experience, 24 percent tannery workers have 3 to 6 years experience, 18 percent tannery workers have 6 to 10 years experience, 12.6 percent tannery workers have 10 to 15 years experience, and only 11.2 percent tannery workers have more than 15 years experience.

It is clear that majority of the tannery workers are having only minimum experience, and only a smaller quantity of tannery workers is having more experience.¹⁸ Working hours is also an indispensable factor to determine the socio-economic conditions of tannery workers. Longer the hours they worked, larger will be their income. Higher income is an index of standard of living. In some tanneries, overtime facilities are also available. If any worker wants to work overtime, he will be given overtime wages which will increase the earnings of the worker. They will also be empowered to perform their job by allotting the hours of work appropriately.¹⁹ 16.6 percent of the tannery workers are working less than 8 hours per day, 80.3 per cent are working between 8 to 10 hours, 2.4 percent are working between 10 to 12 hours, and only 0.7 percent of workers are working more than 12 hours per day.

It is noticed that majority of tannery workers (80.3 percent) are working between 8 to 10 hours, out of the total tannery workers.²⁰ The workers working more than 10 hours are mostly seasonal and contract workers. There is a positive relationship between the hours of work and daily wages of the tannery workers. As hours of work increases, daily wages also increases. No worker is getting lower wages by working longer hours, and getting higher wages by working lesser hours. While framing the constitution, the father of our constitution lay down special provisions for the protection of weaker sections of the community in order to impart Social and Economic Justice to them. Although Article 15 provides that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, yet at the same time.

It also lies down that nothing shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the weaker sections of the society. Article 46 provides that the state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interest of the weaker sections of the people and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation. The constitution also provides that the claims of the members of the backward caste or scheduled Tribes. Shall be taken into consideration, constantly with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of state.²¹ The Provisions laid down in the constitution regarding the assessment of condition of backward classes speaks that the President may by order appoint a commission consisting of such person as he thinks fit to the investigate the conditions of Socially and Educationally Backward Classes within the territory of India and the difficulties under which they labour and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken to remove such difficulties and to improve their condition. Although the constitution provides to the safeguard the interest of the weaker sections of the society and Backward and Schedule Tribes but these provisions seems to be of no use when we study them with the context of the Leather Industry of Dindigul. The industry being unorganized and scattered the workers engaged feel in secured towards their job. Mostly seasonal workers and casual workers are employed in this industry.²² Hence the employer does not care to enroll them as permanent workers.

Even in big units were more than 500 workers were engaged, it was observed that most of them were suffering from the sense of insecurity towards their job as they were not enrolled as permanent workers even after serving the concern for the years. This sense of insecurity of job among the workers is mainly due to lack of strong trade union or workers Association and illiteracy. Secondly most of the units were not observing the rules and regulations of the industrial act which lays down minimum number of days after which the worker is deemed to be a permanent worker.²³

This can only be possible if all the units are combined together to form a single viable unit. The migratory character is also taken as an excuse by some of the employers for not providing the various social amenities of Life to the worker. The caste system is also one of the factors which restrict the workers of this industry to meet social obligations as most of the workers of this industry belong to a particular caste i.e. backward, caste and

schedule tribes. Due to sense of insecurity towards their jobs the worker from mental distress in the workers as such they indulge in bad habits and often it is observed they become regular drunkards and spend a major portion their income in all sorts of ill-habits. Usually they do this in order to avoid physical, mental tension and worries. Illiteracy has also proved to be one of the major factors which prevent the workers to get social justice.

Being illiterate the workers are often exploited by the employers. They receive nominal wages as compared with the labour they perform. Sometimes the wages are below the subsistence level.²⁴ Hence, the workers are forced to take loans or advances by their employers or through other agencies at very high rate of interest. It has been observed that the workers of this industry are deprived of social justice because they do not receive other benefits except wages as there is no powerful association or union.

This can safeguard their rights and privileges.²⁵ Being ignorant and literate the workers of this industry are deprived of the benefits of law. This states, the compensation to be paid to the workers at the time of injury, the medical facilities at the time of maternity. The ESI benefit, the exploitation of children and working women by assigning them the job which the law prohibits, the restricted hour's to work is frequently overlooked and the workers are forced to work more than the hours prescribed under the Act. Though, Article 46 of the constitution provides for the education to be imparted to the weaker section of the society, yet it has been observed that the worker seems to be totally indifferent to give education to their children.²⁶ The Ministry of Human Resources Development headed by Sri M.M. Joshi has made remarks that the education to the children below the age of 16 years should be given without charging any fee. To analyse the effectiveness of the scheme of the Govt. the researcher prepared questionnaire and distributed it to the employers and workers with the object to collect the data of the children per family who are availing of the benefits of the scheme. The researcher knows through the questionnaire that in most of the cases the employers were not keen to respond and in few cases it was noted that they were too ignorant about the scheme.

The percentage of worker who responded to the question was almost insignificant and as such the researcher failed to arrive at any concrete conclusion. It was also noticed that the role of Trade Union and the Tanner's Association was also not up-to-the mark in getting the scheme implemented in the industry.²⁷ This could have benefited the children

the worker. During survey the researcher found that in most of the units the workers were compelled to perform their jobs in conducive atmosphere. The place of work was very dirty, ill-laminated, and was not properly ventilated. The dangerous effluents and waste of leather was producing foul smell that may cause infectious disease to the worker. The workers have been perpetually living in most unhygienic and unhygienic condition.

Consequently most of the worker suffers from some sort of disease. Their children also are prone to infection which prevails in the area where they dwell. In spite of the best efforts of the government the owners of the factories have paid no attention to improve the living conditions. The low standard of living is also a hurdle for the workers to secure social justice as they suffer from a certain complex and often it is observed that they are introvert and hesitate to get mix-up with the people the society. Although the concept of social insurance prevails in Indian Industries but in this industry this concept is not at all observed.²⁸

The labour of this industry bears migratory character and once they come to towns and cities. In search of jobs they find themselves alone and are solitary position because in most of the cases it has been observed that they strive even for a shed to live in and due to adverse circumstances they are being exploited by the employers. The object of social Insurance is to provide insurance to each and every individual of the society but due to lack of strong trade union the workers of this industry are deprived of this benefit.²⁹

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