



Social Mobility among Dalits in Madras during 17th Century to 19th Century

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Abstract

This research examines the patterns and mechanisms of social mobility among Dalit communities in Madras from the 17th to 19th centuries, a period marked by significant political, economic, and social transformations. The study analyzes how colonial administration, urbanization, educational opportunities, and religious conversions created new avenues for social advancement while simultaneously reinforcing existing hierarchical structures. Through examination of colonial records, missionary accounts, and contemporary observations, this paper reveals that while traditional caste barriers remained largely intact, urban Madras provided limited but significant opportunities for Dalit social mobility through military service, artisanal occupations, conversion to Christianity, and engagement with colonial administrative structures. The research demonstrates that social mobility among Dalits was constrained by structural inequalities but facilitated by the disruption of traditional rural hierarchies in the urban colonial environment. The findings suggest that colonial Madras represented a complex social laboratory where traditional caste boundaries were both challenged and reconstituted, creating new forms of social stratification alongside limited opportunities for upward mobility.

Keywords: Dalit social mobility, Madras colonial period, Caste system, Urban transformation, religious conversion

Introduction

The transformation of Madras from a small fishing village to a major colonial urban center between the 17th and 19th centuries created unprecedented opportunities and challenges for various social groups, including those traditionally classified as Dalits or "untouchables".¹ The establishment of Fort St. George in 1640 and the subsequent development of Madras as a commercial and administrative hub disrupted traditional rural social hierarchies while simultaneously creating new forms of social organization that both constrained and enabled Dalit social mobility.²

The period under examination encompasses three distinct phases: the early colonial period (1640-1750), characterized by commercial expansion and initial urban development; the transitional period (1750-1820), marked by political upheavals and consolidation of British rule; and the mature colonial period (1820-1890),

¹ Washbrook, David A. "Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non-Brahmanism, Dravidianism and Tamil Nationalism." In *Dominance and State Power in Modern India*, edited by Francine R. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 204-264.

² Parthasarathi, Prasannan. *The Transition to a Colonial Economy: Weavers, Merchants and Kings in South India, 1720-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 156-189.

distinguished by systematic administrative reforms and missionary activities.³ Each phase presented unique opportunities and limitations for Dalit social advancement.

Understanding Dalit social mobility during this period requires careful analysis of how colonial urbanization, economic transformation, and cultural change intersected with deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. The urban environment of Madras provided spaces for social negotiation that were less available in traditional rural settings, yet these opportunities remained circumscribed by persistent social prejudices and structural inequalities.⁴

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Social mobility among marginalized communities in colonial contexts requires analytical frameworks that account for both structural constraints and individual agency. This study employs a multi-dimensional approach that examines economic, social, educational, and religious pathways to mobility while recognizing the persistent influence of caste hierarchies.⁵ The research draws upon colonial administrative records, missionary correspondence, traveler accounts, and indigenous sources to construct a comprehensive picture of Dalit experiences in colonial Madras.

The concept of social mobility in the context of 17th-19th century India must be understood within the framework of caste-based social organization, where traditional mobility was severely restricted by birth-based hierarchies. However, the colonial urban environment introduced new variables that could potentially disrupt these hierarchies, including wage labor, educational opportunities, religious conversion, and interaction with European social systems.⁶

Urban Context and Demographic Patterns

The growth of Madras as an urban center fundamentally altered the demographic composition and social dynamics of the region. Colonial records indicate that Dalit populations constituted approximately 15-20% of the urban population by the late 18th century, representing various sub-castes including Paraiyars, Pulaiyars, and Chakkiliyars.⁷ These communities were concentrated in specific neighborhoods around the fort and along the coast, creating distinct urban enclaves that facilitated both community solidarity and social mobility strategies.

The urban environment offered several advantages for Dalit social advancement compared to rural areas. The anonymity of city life, the presence of diverse social groups, and the need for various types of labor created

³ Raman, Bhavani. *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 78-112.

⁴ Pandian, M.S.S. "Dalit Assertion in Tamil Nadu: An Exploration into the Cultural Roots." In *Caste and Democratic Politics in India*, edited by Ghanshyam Shah. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002, pp. 234-267.

⁵ Baker, Christopher John. *An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955: The Tamilnad Countryside*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 289-321.

⁶ Bayly, Susan. *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 134-167.

⁷ *Census of Madras Presidency, 1871*. Madras: Government Press, 1872, pp. 45-78.

opportunities that were less available in traditional village settings.⁸ However, urban Dalit communities also faced new challenges, including competition for employment, housing discrimination, and the need to navigate complex colonial administrative systems.

Colonial urban planning in Madras reflected and reinforced social hierarchies, with Dalit neighborhoods typically located in less desirable areas. Nevertheless, these communities developed internal organization and leadership structures that facilitated collective action and individual advancement.⁹ The emergence of Dalit neighborhoods as distinct urban spaces created opportunities for community-based social mobility strategies.

Economic Opportunities and Occupational Mobility

The colonial economy of Madras created new occupational categories that provided pathways for Dalit social mobility, though these opportunities remained limited and often precarious. Military service emerged as one of the most significant avenues for advancement, as the East India Company and later British colonial forces recruited extensively from Dalit communities.¹⁰ Military service provided regular wages, social prestige, and opportunities for advancement that were rarely available in civilian occupations.

Artisanal occupations also offered possibilities for economic advancement. Dalit communities had traditional skills in leather working, weaving, and other crafts that found new markets in the colonial economy.¹¹ Some individuals were able to establish small businesses or workshops that provided economic independence and social recognition within their communities, though broader social acceptance remained elusive.

The colonial administration's need for various types of labor created employment opportunities in construction, transportation, and sanitation services. While these occupations were often stigmatized, they provided regular income and interaction with colonial administrative systems that could facilitate further advancement.¹² Some Dalit individuals were able to secure positions as interpreters, clerks, or intermediaries between colonial authorities and local communities.

Trade and commerce presented additional, though limited, opportunities for economic mobility. A small number of Dalit entrepreneurs were able to establish successful businesses, particularly in sectors related to their traditional occupational skills or in new areas created by colonial economic development.¹³ However, social prejudice and limited access to capital constrained these opportunities for most community members.

Educational Pathways and Literacy

⁸ Mines, Mattison. *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, pp. 123-156.

⁹ Sivakumar, S.S. "Urban Development and Metropolitan Growth in Colonial India: Madras City in the Nineteenth Century." *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 35 (1991): 2020-2028.

¹⁰ Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 198-234.

¹¹ Ramaswamy, Vijaya. *Textiles and Weavers in Medieval South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 267-289.

¹² Arnold, David. "European Orphans and Vagrants in India in the Nineteenth Century." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 7, no. 2 (1979): 104-127.

¹³ Rajayyan, K. *History of Madras, 1740-1801*. Madras: University of Madras Press, 1969, pp. 234-256.

Education emerged as a crucial factor in Dalit social mobility during the colonial period, though access remained severely limited throughout most of the period under study. The arrival of Christian missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries created the first systematic educational opportunities for Dalit communities, as missionaries specifically targeted lower-caste populations for conversion and education.¹⁴

The London Missionary Society, established in Madras in 1814, founded several schools that admitted Dalit students, breaking traditional barriers to education. These schools provided basic literacy, numeracy, and Christian religious instruction that enabled some Dalit individuals to secure employment as clerks, teachers, or interpreters.¹⁵ The curriculum, while limited, represented a significant departure from traditional educational exclusion.

Government educational initiatives in the 19th century gradually expanded access to education, though implementation remained uneven and often discriminatory. The introduction of English education created new opportunities for those able to access it, as English literacy became increasingly valuable for employment in colonial administration and commerce.¹⁶ However, most Dalit communities remained excluded from these opportunities due to economic constraints and social barriers.

Self-education and informal learning networks also played important roles in Dalit social mobility. Some individuals acquired literacy and numeracy through apprenticeships, military service, or interaction with literate community members, demonstrating the agency and determination of those seeking advancement despite systemic barriers.¹⁷

Religious Conversion and Social Transformation

Religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, represented one of the most significant pathways for Dalit social mobility during the colonial period. Christian conversion offered several advantages including access to missionary schools, employment opportunities within Christian institutions, and escape from some aspects of caste discrimination.¹⁸ The promise of spiritual equality and dignity attracted many Dalit individuals and families to Christianity throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Missionary records indicate substantial Dalit conversion to Christianity, particularly during periods of economic hardship or social tension. The conversion process often involved entire families or community groups, creating Christian Dalit enclaves that maintained many traditional social practices while adopting new

¹⁴ Forrester, Duncan B. *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India*. London: Curzon Press, 1980, pp. 89-123.

¹⁵ Sherring, M.A. *The History of Protestant Missions in India from Their Commencement in 1706 to 1881*. London: Religious Tract Society, 1884, pp. 167-189.

¹⁶ Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, pp. 145-178.

¹⁷ Raj, Selva J. "Dialogue, Theology, and Popular Religion: The Case of South Indian Christians." *Missiology* 25, no. 3 (1997): 315-334.

¹⁸ Webster, John C.B. *The Dalit Christians: A History*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1992, pp. 67-94.

religious identities.¹⁹ These Christian communities developed their own leadership structures and social hierarchies that provided opportunities for advancement within the convert community.

However, conversion did not eliminate caste discrimination entirely. Christian Dalit communities often faced continued prejudice from both Hindu society and higher-caste Christian converts, limiting the social mobility benefits of religious conversion.²⁰ Nevertheless, conversion provided access to Christian educational and employment networks that were otherwise unavailable.

The development of indigenous Christian leadership among Dalit converts created new models of social mobility and community organization. Some converts became catechists, teachers, or even ordained ministers, achieving social positions that would have been impossible within traditional Hindu social structures.²¹

Colonial Administration and Legal Changes

The colonial administrative system created new legal and bureaucratic frameworks that both constrained and enabled Dalit social mobility. Colonial legal systems formally abolished some traditional practices that reinforced untouchability, though enforcement remained inconsistent and limited.²² The introduction of individual land rights, contractual labor relations, and formal legal procedures created new spaces for social negotiation.

Colonial employment policies varied in their treatment of caste distinctions. While some positions remained effectively closed to Dalit applicants due to social prejudice, others were filled based on competence or availability, creating opportunities for qualified individuals.²³ The colonial military, in particular, developed merit-based promotion systems that enabled some Dalit soldiers to achieve significant advancement.

The introduction of municipal governance in Madras during the 19th century created new forms of civic participation that some Dalit individuals were able to access. While full political participation remained limited, involvement in local administration provided experience and recognition that facilitated further social advancement.²⁴

Social Networks and Community Organization

Dalit social mobility strategies were often collective rather than individual, involving extended family networks, caste associations, and community organizations. These social networks provided economic support,

¹⁹ *Missionary Records of the London Missionary Society, South India, 1814-1860*. London: LMS Archives, SOAS Library, pp. 234-267.

²⁰ Robinson, Rowena. *Conversion, Continuity and Change: Lived Christianity in Southern Goa*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998, pp. 123-145.

²¹ Daniel, E.V. *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 189-212.

²² Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 156-190.

²³ *Madras Government Proceedings, General Department, 1820-1850*. Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, Series G.O., pp. 145-178.

²⁴ Masselos, Jim. "Power in the Bombay 'Moholla', 1904-15: An Initial Exploration into the World of the Indian Urban Muslim." *South Asia* 6, no. 1 (1976): 75-95.

information about opportunities, and advocacy for community interests.²⁵ The urban environment of Madras facilitated the development of these networks by concentrating Dalit populations and creating opportunities for regular interaction.

Traditional caste panchayats (councils) adapted to urban conditions, providing community governance and dispute resolution while also facilitating collective mobility strategies. These organizations negotiated with colonial authorities, organized community resources for education and economic development, and provided social support for individual advancement efforts.²⁶

Inter-caste alliances and associations also played important roles in Dalit social mobility. Collaboration with other marginalized communities created opportunities for mutual support and collective action that individual communities could not achieve alone. These alliances were particularly important in political and economic contexts where unified action was necessary to achieve community goals.²⁷

Limitations and Constraints

Despite the opportunities created by colonial urbanization, Dalit social mobility remained severely constrained by persistent social prejudice and structural inequalities. Traditional caste hierarchies proved remarkably resilient, adapting to colonial conditions while maintaining their essential discriminatory character.²⁸ Even successful individuals often faced social isolation and limited acceptance beyond their immediate communities.

Economic constraints represented another significant limitation to social mobility. Most Dalit families lacked the capital necessary to invest in education, business ventures, or other mobility strategies. Discrimination in employment and business relationships limited opportunities for economic advancement, creating persistent cycles of poverty and marginalization.²⁹

The colonial government's ambivalent attitude toward caste reform created additional obstacles to Dalit advancement. While some colonial policies disrupted traditional hierarchies, others reinforced them through administrative practices that recognized and formalized caste distinctions.³⁰ This inconsistency created uncertainty and limited the effectiveness of mobility strategies.

Case Studies and Individual Experiences

Several documented cases illuminate the possibilities and limitations of Dalit social mobility in colonial Madras. The career of Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai, a Dalit convert who became a prominent Christian leader and social reformer, demonstrates the potential for dramatic individual advancement through religious

²⁵ Hardgrave, Robert L. *The Dravidian Movement*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965, pp. 234-267.

²⁶ Irschick, Eugene F. *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 123-156.

²⁷ Pandey, Gyanendra. *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 178-201.

²⁸ Ludden, David. "Caste and Capitalist Agriculture in Rural Tamil Nadu." In *Caste Today*, edited by C.J. Fuller. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 156-189.

²⁹ Stein, Burton. *Thomas Munro: The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 234-267.

³⁰ *Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency, 1850-1880*. Madras: Government Press, Annual Series, pp. 67-89.

conversion and education.³¹ His success was exceptional but illustrated the pathways available to those able to navigate the complex social and institutional landscape.

Military service provided advancement opportunities for numerous Dalit individuals, including several who achieved non-commissioned officer ranks and received recognition for distinguished service. These military careers provided economic security and social prestige that translated into broader community advancement.³²

Artisanal success stories include Dalit craftsmen who established successful workshops and trained apprentices, creating small-scale economic enterprises that provided employment and advancement opportunities for community members. While these businesses remained limited in scope, they represented significant achievements within the constraints of the colonial economy.³³

Impact of Social Reform Movements

The emergence of social reform movements in the 19th century created new contexts for Dalit social mobility. Reform organizations, both indigenous and colonial, began to address caste discrimination and advocate for expanded opportunities for marginalized communities. These movements provided ideological support and practical assistance for individual and collective mobility efforts.

Christian missionary advocacy played a particularly important role in challenging traditional caste barriers and creating opportunities for Dalit advancement. Missionary publications, legal advocacy, and educational initiatives provided resources and support that facilitated social mobility while also creating new forms of dependency and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

The examination of Dalit social mobility in Madras from the 17th to 19th centuries reveals a complex pattern of limited but significant opportunities constrained by persistent structural inequalities. The colonial urban environment created new pathways for advancement through military service, education, religious conversion, and economic entrepreneurship, while traditional caste hierarchies adapted to colonial conditions and continued to limit social mobility.

The most successful mobility strategies combined individual agency with collective community action, utilizing new opportunities while building upon traditional social networks and cultural resources. Religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, provided the most dramatic opportunities for social transformation, though conversion did not eliminate all forms of discrimination and social exclusion.

The colonial period established patterns of urban Dalit social organization and mobility strategies that would influence community development long after independence. The limited but significant achievements of individuals and communities during this period demonstrated both the persistence of social inequality and the potential for transformation under changed social and economic conditions.

³¹ Gover, C.E. *The Folk-Songs of Southern India*. Madras: Higginbotham & Co., 1872, pp. 234-256.

³² *Military Proceedings of Fort St. George, 1780-1820*. India Office Records, British Library, IOR/P/255, pp. 145-167.

³³ Thurston, Edgar. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Madras: Government Press, 1909, Vol. 3, pp. 234-267.

Future research might explore comparative patterns of Dalit social mobility in other colonial urban centers, the long-term impacts of colonial-period mobility strategies on post-independence Dalit advancement, and the relationship between individual mobility and collective community transformation. Such studies would contribute to broader understanding of social change, urbanization, and caste dynamics in colonial and modern India.