

## SOCIAL CHANGES TOOK PLACE IN THE PALMYRAH WORK ON THE EVE OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to throw the light on the conditions of palmyrah work and palmyrah workers of Tamil Nadu especially in Tirunelveli District in the twentieth century. Also in this article, early evidences about the palmyrah work and its social status are described. It also connects the palmyrah work with kings. The various governmental efforts to encourage the work during the mid twentieth century are also narrated. The efforts of the then chief minister K. Kamaraj in this regard was well utilized by the workers. The increase in the level of white sugar led to the decrease in the demand of palm jaggery and it creates unemployment to the palmyrah workers. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced the worst history in the chapter of palmyrah workers, because many workers were expelled from their work in this time. The prohibition of toddy was important in making social stigma to palmyrah workers. The views of Gandhi about the palmyrah work are elaborated. The social changes takes place in the end of twentieth century emerged as a major problem to the palmyrah workers in society. They are exposed to various ill-treatments among society. The associations created for the welfare of them is one of the important steps to redress their needs. The some of the demands were highlighted in this article.

**Keywords-** *Palmyrah, White Sugar, Toddy, Degradation, Demands.*

### Introduction

Botanically, the Palmyrah belongs to the family of Palmae or Areaceae. There are 2500 species within this family. These are Shrubs, trees or sometimes climbers. E.g. cane (Calamus). The genus name of Palmyrah Palm is Borassus. There are six species in Borassus and they grow in tropical and subtropical regions of the World. The botanical name of Palmyrah Palm is Borassus flabellifer. Carl Linnaeus was the author of genus name, Borassus and the species name is Borassus flabellifer and he published the name in 1753. Palmyra Palm is densely distributed in Indian subcontinent and South East Asian Countries. In Tamil it is called “Panai”. The Palmyrah is polycarpic, usually flowering and fruiting year after year, between March and September. They are dioecious trees, that is male trees and female trees are separate. The trunk is black, un-branched and woody. It is marked with the scars of shed leaves. They grow upto a height of 30 meters. Male trees are known as “Alaku Panai” and the Female trees are known as “Paruva Panai” in Tamil<sup>1</sup>.

### Early References about Palmyrah work

In the History of Tamils, Palmyra Palm has a great valuable and respectable place. This tree is one of the life supporting plants to the Tamils from pre-historic period. It was recorded in Sangam literature, copper plate messages and in inscriptional evidences. Early Tamils had the physique, technique, mind and skill to extract and process the Palmyra sap. Historians record the social importance and the involvement of Palmyra Palm in all spheres of early Tamil culture especially among the Cheras. The available Sangam literature, Purananoru - song 235 refers to palm toddy, which was regarded and in high profile in the court of Tamil kings.

“சிறியகட் பெறினே யெமக்கீயு மன்றே  
பெரியகட் பெறினே  
யாம்பாடத் தான்மகிழ்ந் துண்ணு மன்றே”

This gives the message about the king 'Athiyamaan Nedumananchi'; that he treats only the poets with toddy, even it is in short supply and drinks the same with them and enjoyed the poems sung by the poets, when the availability of toddy is plenty. This clearly shows that the art of extracting the sap to make toddy is much earlier to this period of BC 1000. In Tamil Sangam literatures, the word Kallu (toddy) is used for nearly 37 times. Toddy has a special name, Cholvilambi. The chera king "Naar Mudi Cheral", had taken oath to wear a crown made of Petiole peel (Panai Naar) till he wins over the king 'Nannan'. He did win Nannan later<sup>2</sup> and adorn himself with the crown made up of palmyrah strings. Herodotus, the father of History has recorded that the palmyrah climbers of southern Tamil Nadu were good navigators, who travelled to European countries and West Asia for trade<sup>3</sup>. This clearly shows that the palmyrah climbing occupation is an ancient occupation of Tamil Nadu.

### Governmental Measures in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century

In the mid twentieth century, besides the production of jaggery, some of them also engaged in subsidiary occupations such as coir-making, brush-making and sheep-rearing. Sometimes the Government gave them loans through co-operatives to encourage their work. Their main occupation being the production of jaggery or palm gur, a State-wide scheme was launched in 1949 to improve the Palm Gur industry by the adoption of improved utensils and scientific methods of production. Since then the Palm Gur Instructors appointed under the scheme impart training to the members of the jaggery co-operative societies in the improved methods of manufacturing palm jaggery by using improved gur-making equipment. This equipment is in many places supplied at half the cost and in some places free. Under the Second Five-Year Plan it is proposed to supply 900 improved gur-making sets to the societies at half the cost price. The Palm Gur Instructors also train the ex-tapper members of the societies in the manufacture of toffee, sweetmeats, etc., from palm gur and white sugar from palm- juice with the aid of centrifugal machines. In some cases these centrifugal machines have been supplied free of cost and it is proposed under the Second Five-Year Plan to supply two of such machines to two jaggery co-operative societies free of cost every year. The Government was likewise assisting these societies in various ways to find a market for their goods. It may also be stated here that in order to provide further employment to the ex-tappers in the districts of Tirunelveli, Ramanathapuram and Salem, the sale of palm juice as a beverage has been permitted and that the sale of pathaneer through shops or in selected centres run by the jaggery manufacturing co-operatives<sup>4</sup>.

It is estimated that there are 40 lakhs of palmyrahs is found in Tirunelveli district in 1966. The making of palm Jaggeries through boiling the Palm juice is the chief cottage industry at that time. During the time of Kamarajar, more than 400 palm jaggery producers Co-operative board were established. The total members working on the above boards are numbered nearly 70,000. The state government financially assisted these boards by giving money for constructing the necessary godowns and to maintain share capital and working capital were provided by the government. During the financial years of 1964-1965 and 1965-1966, there is amount of 10.42 and 4.80 lakhs respectively was given as loans of share capital and working capital by the government of Tamil Nadu. It is also to be noted that the Tirunelveli District Palm Products Development Board headquartered at Thoothukudi had went on profitably at that time. This board exports the various palmyrah articles to foreign countries like USA, England and Malaysia<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, much importance was given by government to the farming of sugarcane, which is the raw material in the production of white sugar. Many new sugar factories were established during the period of Kamaraj, which reduced the price and demand of palm jaggery<sup>6</sup>. When the time palmyrah work is on the decline, the white sugar industry emerged as the greatest one in entire Tamil Nadu. This indirectly reduces the demand of Palm jaggery, the prime product of palmyrah. Government of Tamil Nadu is the pioneer in looking after the development of Palmyrah workers and their families. In order to enhance the condition of palmyrah workers, the Tamil Nadu palm products development board was created. It helps the workers to produce their products in markets with attraction. Tamil Nadu palm products development board was established as per Tamil Nadu Act 1994 during the year 1995 with its headquarters at Chennai. The main objective of the board is to provide an institutionalized support to palm products development and to provide cooperative platform for the sustenance of palm product industry thereby promoting the welfare of the Palmyrah artisans<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Biased Palmyrah tax**

In the land reform act passed on 21 February 1948 the government assured to abolish the tax for the palmyrah trees. It gave great encouragement to the palmyrah workers who lived in the Tirunelveli district. But the government did not keep up its promise to abolish the tax on the palmyrah trees<sup>8</sup>. In the meantime the government announced some concession from their previous taxation on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1953 in the legislative council<sup>9</sup>. Adithanar was not satisfied with the announcement and decided to raise his voice against it in the house. So he explained the government clearly about the inconveniences of palmyrah workers because of the levied taxes and requested it to stop the collection of the palmyrah taxes from the poor people. But the government was adamant in its position. Since the government did not take up any useful action over this. He resigned his membership from the council on 5 Januray 1954 to show his protest against the government for not keeping its promise over the abolition of palmyrah taxes<sup>10</sup>.

#### **Toddy and its relation to the decline of palmyrah work**

Palm toddy was especially valued for its medicinal utility, particularly in the treatment of gonorrhoea. But when prohibition introduced in Madras Presidency, the drinking of toddy is considered as a sin. In spite of the climbers of Tirunelveli district had not involved in tapping of toddy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their association of Palmyrah earned them a negative image as toddy drawers<sup>11</sup>. But they mostly climbed for pathaneer, they climbed toddy only for few

medicinal purposes but not for commercial purposes. By the late 1930s, the All India Congress leadership was working hard to salvage the palm industry. In fact, the industry had come to be constituted around the wider utility of the palm industry by the time prohibition was introduced in the Madras Presidency. Gandhi made it clear that he desired the country liquor industry's rehabilitation as the palm industry in a series of editorials that he published in Harijan. Nine months after prohibition's introduction in the Madras Presidency, one such article argued that it was 'high time' that all the provinces 'realised the economic importance of the four kinds of sugar-yielding palms, viz. coconut, date, palmyra and sago'. To this end, the article advised that people 'should give up the prejudices against these palms' and instead 'do their best to propagate and protect the palms wherever possible'. Similarly, Gandhi was dismayed when he found that a member of his ashram had chopped down some palm trees in the early 1940s. He wrote, 'The Palm is a poor man's tree. Do I have to explain to you its usefulness... The palm-tree is interwoven with our life'. By this point in time, the Congress sought to put behind it the memory of the 'prejudices' that it had itself fanned during the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience movements<sup>12</sup>. Even after the independence, the prohibition still continued made a projection of palmyrah climbing work is a social degradable one. Rajaji advocated for the closure of toddy shops in 1950s. At the same time, Palmyra climbers don't run any toddy shops and also not tapped toddy for their economic life. So, the propaganda of Rajaji did nothing immediately on the life of palmyra Climbers in Southern districts. In these circumstances, we must realise that the drinking of toddy is not interwoven into the Social and internal life of the palmyrah climbers of Tirunelveli district except for some medicinal purposes. But the propaganda of Rajaji gradually spread into the mind of masses that toddy is alcoholic and prohibiting drink which was getting from the palmyrahs. So, the palmyra climbers associated with palmyrahs were started calling as toddy tappers, instead of their palm jaggery making work. Using the opportunity, the then society started calling the poorer palmyrah climbers as drinking class<sup>13</sup>.

#### **Social degradation in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century**

The social degradation of palmyrah workers started through the changes in the political system that occurred in the Tamil Nadu after the arrival of Nayak Kings. During the rule of Telugu Nayaks, as the Tamils who professed palmyrah sap extraction refused to accept foreigner supremacy, they were subjected to caste-based discrimination and thus crippled their economy. This led to the new social degradation which kept aloof the palmyrah climbers from administration and it was continued by successive rulers. European administrators also patronised this caste based discrimination to eliminate rivalry for their sugar industry<sup>14</sup>. In the previous century, Travancore government committed many atrocities against Nadars of kanniyakumari district in the hope that no one would questioned. But the relations of palmyrah workers living in Tirunelveli district decided to go masses inside the boundaries of Travancore and started violence against the Travancore government. The palmyrah climbers of Tirunelveli district participated in masses in these struggles. This created fear at rulers of Travancore and finally they agreed nadars to wear upper cloth. The upper cloth ended only after the intervention of palmyrah workers of Tirunelveli district<sup>15</sup>. This Social mobility was completely absent among the Nadars in Tirunelveli district in the late 1980s and also create divisions among them made the palmyrah climbing as the worst job. The palmyra climbers originally received good respect in the ancient days. But after some times, they were ill-treated in the Society. In regard

to the marriage ceremony, the rest of the nadar community disliked to give their daughter in family of a palmyrah worker. Because they felt that palmyrah climbing is a risky job sometimes it cause the life of climber led to his daughter a widow. Another thing is the hardness to the women, because in every climber family, women do all the works for boiling the palmyrah juice and also experienced the dust, heat and black smoke. So, they not showed any desire to allow their daughter to work in this type of hard work. So the ill treatment and bad comments about the palmyrah work first came from the nadar community in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>16</sup>.

#### **Advent of Association among them**

It is a bitter fact that no political party or government has taken any action for the advancement of palmyrah workers, and they have not taken any action to alleviate their organizational needs. Seeing the plight of such workers, some well- intentioned people who are concerned about social development have been involved in efforts to create awareness and organize these people during the 1980s. Since the industry is united well, it was divided by politicians and religious people and exploited them in the society. In during the 1980s, the palmyrah workers of Tirunelveli district are forming organizations at the village, taluk and district level and are working for their development. In the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Palm workers have a strong belief that their grievances, problems and needs can be resolved only if they have a strong organization. They have also got a new idea that victories can be achieved through continuous struggles. So far, the organizations have been involved in problems at the village, taluk and district level, so they have not been able to win on a large scale. To change this situation and establish an organization at the Tamil Nadu level and thereby strengthen the hands of the government for their demand, the representatives of the palm workers gathered at the Tamil Nadu level and formed an organization called “Tamil Nadu Palmyrah Workers Development Association” and the general committee and the working committee were selected. In the first phase, the Palmyrah Workers Conference was held on October 23, 1983 at Thiruchendhur with a new upheaval. According to the decision of the State Working Committee of Tamil Nadu Palmyrah Workers Association, a six- member high- level committee on 27-6-1985 gave a 10- point demand at Chennai Fort and held talks with Vijaya Lakshmi Palaniswami, the then minister of Khadi Department. Minister promises immediate fulfillment of three demands on 28-6-1985<sup>17</sup>.

#### **Major demands in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century**

1. In case of death due to an accident while working in the palmyrah, the family of the palmyrah worker should be immediately given the stipend as ordered by the government without any postmortem.
2. Government mandated Rs 5,000/- financial assistance should be increased to Rs 15,000/- to the family of a palmyrah worker who dies in an accident.
3. The government should come forward to pay the premium paid by palmyrah workers.
4. In order to avoid the problems caused by the honey bees on palmyrah work during the season, the transfer of beehives from one district to another district should be prohibited.
5. Government to set up separate board for palmyrah workers to encourage palm industry and export of palm products.
6. Government should fix the price of Palm Jaggery.

7. Palmyrahs in the government lands on lease should be given to the Palmyrah Worker only.
8. The government should provide stipend to the palm workers during the off-season.
9. Researches should be carried out to make palmyrah industry scientific.
10. Loans provided by the Government should be provided through palmyrah workers organizations<sup>18</sup>.

### Conclusion

Since Independence, some efforts were made for the improvement of Palmyrah work. But, an analysis of achievements would indicate a very slow progress made in this direction. Also, there is rarely any important schemes had prepared for the plantation of palmyrahs in twentieth century. If all tappable trees could be exploited, it has the potential to provide employment to more than 20 lakhs persons. Moreover, this will generate wealth to the order of more than Rs. 400 crores annually. In during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than developing this industry, various social evils and societal changes that destroys palmyrah work and the life of many palmyrah workers. Since the work is respected in ancient days, after the nineteenth century, the palmyrah work is considered as a degraded one. It is significant to note that the palmyrah work was connected with the ruling races of Tamil Nadu in earlier times. The prohibition of toddy and introduction of white sugar was the main reasons to change the social and economic conditions of palmyrah workers. The political conditions in Tamil Nadu during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are also the important reason for the decline of work. Because the governments of that time did nothing to encourage the palmyrah workers with schemes, they were completely neglected by the government. So, they formed associations for themselves. After that only, some of the major demands were fulfilled by the government in order to pacify them. In spite of all the above, after the twentieth century, the palmyrah work is considered as a social degrading work and also started to decline than ever. So in future, all-out efforts should be made to harness the potentials of the industry as a source of generation of wealth, income and reduction of poverty in Tamil Nadu.

### Endnotes

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