

Melpathi: Caste Hindus Who Refuse to Allow Dalits into Temples; Dalits Who Say That Religious Conversion is the Solution

Bharath. G¹

¹Ph.D. (Full Time) Research Scholar, Department of History, Arignar Anna Govt. Arts College, Cheyyar.

Abstract

The Draupadi Amman temple is located in the village of Melpathi in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. The affected Dalit people allege that they are not allowed to enter and worship in this temple. A major case of caste-based discrimination and denial of religious rights to Dalits (Adi Dravidians) has been ongoing from 2023 to 2025. During the annual temple festival, Dalit people tried to enter the Sri Dharmaraja Draupadi Amman temple, managed by the Hindu Religious and Endowments Department (HR&CE). They were reportedly prevented from entering by members of the dominant Vanniyar community, and several Dalit youths were allegedly attacked. During the festival held in 2023, a Dalit youth named Kathiravan entered the temple and was severely attacked by members of the Vanniyar caste. The issue then came to the fore. The incident triggered widespread protests, intervention by political parties and civil society organizations, and police action. After the peace talks failed, the affected Dalits announced that they would convert to Islam. The district administration sealed the temple in June 2023 to prevent violence. As a result of the continued knocking on the court door by the affected people, the Madras High Court gave a verdict on February 20, 2025, allowing the Dalits to enter the temple. Following this, on April 15, 2025, the district administration and the police took the affected Dalits to the temple under heavy security and made them worship. Although the issue has been resolved legally, in social reality this issue is still simmering between the two communities.

Keywords: Caste discrimination- Festival and Attack-Denial of Entry to Temple- High Court Intervention- The decision to religion convert-Legal rights of Dalits-Ongoing discrimination.

Introduction

The violence perpetrated on the Dalits in this country in the name of caste, which is the bedrock of Hinduism, is uncountable. Although the law says that untouchability has been abolished, most of the caste Hindus act with the feeling that "we will abolish the law and never allow untouchability to be abolished." It can be said that the backward classes have fully involved themselves in the full implementation of parochialism. This worst-caste structure, which is not found in any other country or any other religion in the world, is the worst characteristic of Hinduism alone. It sees fellow human beings in their religion as untouchable. No matter how many reformers come, no matter how many laws come, the minds of caste Hindus are not changed. The reactionary and ferocious nature of caste Hindus is a constant cause of such conflicts. Also, it makes one think that a fellow man is inferior and himself superior. In July last year, according to information released in the Parliament of India, 345 villages in 37 districts of Tamil Nadu

have been identified as districts prone to atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Tribes. “In 38 districts of Tamil Nadu, 1,144 cases of atrocities against Scheduled Castes were reported in 2019 and 1,274 in 2020. 1,377 cases were reported in 2021. Caste atrocities are increasing every year. In this article, we will look at the temple entry protest of Dalit people in Melpathi, Villupuram district, and the behavior of caste Hindus who prevent Dalits from entering the temple.

Location and Structure of Melpathi

Melpathi village is located in Kolianur panchayat union in Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. It falls under the Villupuram Assembly Constituency and the Villupuram Lok Sabha Constituency. Villages located in Melpathi Panchayat: 1. Pillayarkuppam; 2. Melpathi (Caste Hindus area); 3. New Colony; 4. Melpathy Colony (Dalit's area). Like 6 lakh villages in India, Melpathi village is divided into a caste Hindu area and a colony. In the caste Hindu area, there are three streets, namely Vinayakar Koil Street, Nadu Street, and Odaikaran Street. A total of 550 families of Vanniyars live on these three streets. Similarly, there are four streets in the colony, namely Main Street, Mariamman Koil Street, Valluvar Street, and Kengaiyamman Koil Street. A total of 150 Paraiyar families are living in the colony. All government buildings, like the panchayat office, drinking water tank, school, and Ration shop, are in the Caste Hindus area. There is not even the single Government building in the Colony. Most of the land in the village is owned by Vanniyars. Due to the lack of land, the slum dwellers have to survive by doing wage labor on the lands of caste Hindus. Meanwhile, some Dalits also have land. It cannot be denied that there is a situation where some landless Vanniyars work as wage laborers for the land-owning Dalits. So, overall, caste Hindus own most of the village lands. The majority of the people in the village belong to the Vanniyar caste. Dalits are minority. That is, only these two castes, namely Vanniyar and Paraiyar, are living in that village. The Vanniyars, who are in the majority in everything like economy, education, employment, political responsibilities, and caste supremacy, are very easily oppressing the Dalits, who are the minority in all the above fields.

Population of Melpathi

Melpathi is a large village located in Viluppuram Taluk of Viluppuram district, Tamil Nadu, with a total of 700 families residing there. The total geographical area of the village is 395.2 hectares. The Melpathi village has a population of 2041, of which 1030 are males and 1011 are females, as per the 2011 Population Census. At present, the population of Melpathi village is 3000. (This information was received from the Panchayat President of Melpathi.) In Melpathi village, the population of children aged 0–6 is 253, which makes up 12.40% of the total population of the village. The average sex ratio of Melpathi village is 982, which is lower than the Tamil Nadu state average of 996. The child sex ratio for the Melpathi as per the census is 1057, higher than the Tamil Nadu average of 943. Melpathi village has a lower literacy rate compared to Tamil Nadu. In 2011, the literacy rate of Melpathi village was 68.74%, compared to 80.09% in Tamil Nadu. In Melpathi, male literacy stands at 75.19%, while the female literacy rate is 62.09%. Currently, a total of 700 families are living there. There are 1050 voters among caste Hindus and 600 voters in slums. Similarly, the literacy rate and voter rate have also increased now. As per the Constitution of India and the Panchyat Raaj Act, Melpathi village is administered by the Sarpanch (head of village), who is elected representative of the village. Manivel is the current panchayat president.

Present Situation of Melpathi Village

Melpathi is a small village that covers a total of seven streets. The residences of caste Hindus are terraced houses and flats. Such buildings show their material development. The colony, inhabited by Dalits, is made up of irregular settlements. Now there is an environment where two-story houses are being built. Otherwise, there are small houses. Academic understanding seems to be good on both sides of the population. Most of the youth are graduates. Educated youth are working for many private companies in outlying areas. Some also prepare for competitive exams for government jobs. Likewise, there are students on both sides who realize the importance of school and college. The victim, Kandan's son, Kathiravan, passed the Group 2 examination conducted by the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission last year and is currently working as a JDO in the Public Works Department. Seven people are currently working as government employees in the caste Hindu area and six as government employees in the Dalit area.

Dalit people have been building a huge Mariamman temple for themselves. There is a woman as the priest of that temple. It is noteworthy that the woman is a Vanniyar-caste woman living in a colony married to a Dalit youth. Thus, Dalit people are democrats who give Vanniyar caste women the highest responsibility in their temple. However, the Vanniyar caste behaves against it. After the Commissioner of Revenue locked the Draupadi Amman temple on July 7, the anger and impotence of the Vanniyaes increased. There is a feeling among the Vanniyar people that the temple was locked by the Dalits. It has created great division and enmity among the students studying at the same school. Fearing this, Dalit people have not sent their children to school for several days. Later, with the government's intervention, a separate vehicle was called for the Dalit students, and they were safely transported to the school. In protest against this, Manivel, Panchayat President Vanniyar has taken the children away, saying that he will not send caste children to school. Thus, the Draupadi Amman temple issue has affected even the students studying at the school.

Trend of Temple Issue

The Draupadi Amman temple in Melpathi is three hundred years old. A festival is held in the temple every year in the month of April. Dalits have the right to worship only on the seventh day of the festival, which is held for nine consecutive days. That, too, is not allowed inside the temple. It is an environment of standing outside and worshipping. The temple, which was built with the contribution of Dalits, still receives share tax from the Dalits. Approximately, the Dalits donate up to one lakh rupees annually to the temple. But Dalits are still not allowed inside the temple. Dalits have repeatedly asserted their religious rights against the Vanniyaes. But they rejected it for some reason. The caste Hindus are disturbed by the current Dalit youths, who occasionally talk about the right to temple worship and make strong demands. Caste Hindus have been extra cautious during the festival, fearing that Dalit youths might enter the temple at any time. Accordingly, to ensure that Dalits do not enter the temple, some Vanniyar youths have been assigned to guard the temple during this year's festival.

Festival and Attack

As usual, the Draupadi Amman temple festival has been held this year as well. The nine-day festival of April 8, the festival of fire, is reserved for Dalits. That is, the seventh day of the festival is reserved for Dalits to stand and worship outside the temple. At that time, a Dalit youth named Kathiravan took four of his fellow Dalit friends and tried to enter the temple. Vanniyar youths, who were stationed there to prevent Dalits from entering the temple, stopped Kathiravan and his friends and abused them by using obscene words. Kathiravan has heard that Vanniya boys who are less than them in age and education are behaving

disrespectfully. The festival crew, who were watching this, panicked, ran, and surrounded Kathiravan and his friends. Kathiravan called his father and told him what was happening. Kathiravan's father Kanthan, mother, and sister immediately ran panicked near the temple. Kanthan, his wife, and his daughter begged the Vanniyyas, who had only imprisoned Kathiravan, to release their son. Manivel, the panchayat president, who was watching all this with amusement, scolded Kathiravan and his family and left the place. But by then, the Vanniyaars had gathered and attacked Kathiravan indiscriminately. The Vanniyaars beat Kanthan and even his wife and daughter indiscriminately as they tried to save their son from them. By then, the festival crew had made an announcement over the microphone.

"Tie up the s the Parayas who have entered the temple! No other Parayas should come near the temple after beating them!"

The affected people say that the announcement was made on the instructions of Panchayat President Manivel. As the announcement was made on the microphone for the village to listen to, the Dalit people also came to know the information and ran towards the temple. The Dalits who were running towards the temple were stopped and scolded by Vanniyaars. The situation is dire. Meanwhile, his father, mother, and sister took Kathiravan, entered the sugarcane plantation, and ran for their lives. Vanniyaars have chased them to the colony. Kanthan, Kathiravan, and Kanthan's wife were all severely attacked and admitted to the hospital.

Roadblock protest

Unable to oppose the majority of the Vanniyaars, Dalits, a minority, staged a sit-in protest on the Kumbakonam highway. After hearing the protest, DSP and RDO reached the spot and held talks. Aggrieved Dalits filed a complaint against 20 Vanniyaars under the Prevention of SC/ST Atrocities Act. After receiving the complaint, the police promised to take appropriate action and cleared the protestors.

Fake Complaint of Caste Hindus

Knowing that a complaint has been lodged against them under the Prevention SC/ST of Atrocities Act, the Vanniyaars have lodged a fake complaint against 22 Dalits, including Kathiravan and Kanthan. In the complaint, 22 Dalits, including Kanthan and Kathiravan, have written that they teased a Vanniyaar woman who had come to the temple. Dalit people say that the Vanniyaars filed this complaint as per the instructions of the pro-Vanniyaar police.

After this incident, a law-and-order situation prevailed not only in Melpathi village but also in surrounding areas of the district. Dalit people, who have lost faith in the police, have submitted a petition to the district collector's office. Former Minister Ponmudi, who had come to the district collectorate on other work, assured that everyone has the right to worship in the temple. Further stressing the importance of putting aside differences of opinion, he assured the Dalit representatives that the district administration would take the necessary steps to resolve the issue. At the same time, the Vanniyaars staged a protest in front of the temple, claiming that it was a temple only for their caste. Vanniyaars protested by tearing up their Ration cards and Aadhaar cards. They also made their school-going children to participate in that struggle.

Government intervention

Draupadi Amman Temple is under the control of the Hindu Religious Charities Department (ITMS No. 22467). Since 1978, the temple has been under the Hindu Religious Trust for the last 45 years. The documents are also clear. In a case filed by Nagaraj in this regard, the Madras High Court, in its order,

confirmed that the Draupadi Amman temple in question belongs to the Hindu Religious Charities Department. On April 12, 2023, the Hindu Religious Charities Department appointed a Thakkar for this temple.(who is in the position of the accountant and in charge of the temple). In spite of this fact, the Vanniyars are preventing the Adi Dravidian community from worshipping as a way of practicing untouchability. For the past two months, many steps have been taken by the district administration to end this problem smoothly. MLAs of the Maylam, Vikravandi, and Villupuram MLAs belonging to this area, the Villupuram Member of Parliament, the District Collector, the Superintendent of Police, and other officials also participated in the peace talks. Several rounds of talks have also taken place under the leadership of Ravichandran,(RDO). However, no solution has been found yet. In order to solve this problem, on Friday, April 2, 2023, representatives of 11 parties in Villupuram gathered, and an all-party consultation meeting was held under the chairmanship of Villupuram Member of Parliament Dr. Ravikumar. In this meeting, it was decided that the government should take appropriate steps to bring Dalits into the temple so that they get justice; otherwise, a protest will be held in support of the Dalits.

Intervention by Political Parties

Political parties, which should stand by the aggrieved Dalits, should side with the domineering and abusive Vanniyars and incite them further against the Dalits. Especially Paattali Makkal Katchi (Party for Proletarians) and Hindu Munnani personalities went to Melpathi Village and expressed their support for the Vanniyars, making way for them to continue their immoral struggle. Local people and journalist Vinodhan say that the AIADMK was also indirectly supporting the Vanniyars in this issue. The Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (Liberation Tigers Party) and the Puratchi Bharatham Katchi (Revolution Bharat Party) held demonstrations demanding justice for the affected Dalits, and the government implemented their demand for temple entry.

Sealed Temple

Ravichandran (RDO), locked and sealed the temple as per Section 145 of the law on June 7th, as the Vanniyars did not accept the right of worship of the Dalit people despite several rounds of negotiations with the Commissioner of Revenue, MLAs, Member of Parliament, and District Collector. Even today, the temple is heavily guarded by police. There is still a tense atmosphere there. The police and panchayat leaders expressed their tense situation when I visited the area regarding this issue. Especially when the panchayat president was approached, he did not cooperate properly.

Religious Conversion Decision

The temple lock was not enough for the Dalit people, who had been fighting peacefully to be allowed to enter the Draupadi Amman temple, to demand action under the Prevention of Atrocities Act against the Vanniyars who had beaten up the youths who entered the temple to worship during the festival and their parents and spoke insultingly on the basis of caste. The government did not give proper justice to the Dalits. There is an apprehension among the Dalit people that the government is trying to close the issue by locking the temple without implementing the High Court order that the government should do what it can to visit the Draupadi Amman temple with full rights. So on July 27th, the entire Dalit community made an announcement to leave Hinduism and change their religion. In 1981, when such a problem occurred in Meenakshipuram in Tirunelveli district, the Dalit people there as a whole converted to Islam and registered their protest not only against the atrocities of untouchability that were inflicted on them in

Hinduism. Similarly, Dalits of Melpathi Village have decided themselves to the religious conversion.

Facts revealed in fieldwork

As much as it is true that the Vanniyars do not have the slightest desire for the right of Dalits to the Draupadi Amman Temple, in the same way, only 40 Dalit families have the right to share in the Draupadi Amman Temple out of the total of 150 Dalit families. It is important to note that not all Dalits have this right. It is customary there that the 40 Dalit families who have such share rights have to auction the properties of Melpathi every year and give them a share of the proceeds. Vanniyars have repeatedly insisted that those 40 Dalit families who are getting share rights in such village public properties should get rid of the ownership of the temple by themselves. A few years ago, two Dalit families were bought by the Vanniyar party to sign on a blank sheet of paper. They have cheated the two Dalit families by writing on that blank paper that they no longer want any rights in the temple share. Therefore, the rule is that Dalit families who pay a share in the temple should be given a share of the proceeds of a public property auction. There is now a conspiracy going on there to deny the shares of Dalits and to take away their right over the temple.

Solutions for permanent peace

The government has tried to maintain temporary peace by deploying hundreds of policemen. The government wants to treat both sides equally without guaranteeing Dalit people's right to worship or punishing Vanniyars who act violently and against the law. But that is not fair. It is right to stand by the affected people. Also, the government should have immediately granted the Dalits' right to worship as per the High Court order. The Vanniyar people should have been pacified by giving adequate talks and psychological counseling to change their minds. The violence will be reduced only if the districts where such violent incidents occur are identified and declared 'violent districts' and the Chief Minister directs special attention and monitoring. Similarly, the police in the intelligence department are in harmony with the casteists, as they belong to their respective villages and belong to the majority caste there. Due to this, there is no fair investigation into the incidents of violence. In the intelligence department, people from outside or from other castes should be recruited. To prevent violence, the Vigilance Committees headed by the Chief Minister and District Collectors should appoint activists who actually work for social justice and eradicate the problems. Caste differences are also seen among the school children who will live in the area for the upcoming generations. To prevent that, continuous conversations should be held with teachers about social justice and how to live as a casteless person. Overall, the government and the parties in the government should work together constructively for a peaceful atmosphere in the upper half. In addition, educators and volunteers should camp in the area and interact among the dominant castes to create a harmonious environment. Political Parties such as P.M.K. and Hindu Munnani, which mislead the people, should be exposed to the people there.

High Court verdict and opening of the Melpathi temple

The Draupadi Amman Temple in Villupuram district has now been opened for public worship as per the order of the Madras High Court. Justice G.K. Ilandhirian passed the order in this case on February 20, 2025, stating in this case on February 20, 2025, it was "All sections of society should be allowed to have darshan of the deity, regardless of caste." Therefore, on April 16, 2025, Dalit people were taken to the temple with heavy police security and allowed to worship. The Dalit people who worshipped were

intercepted, and even then, caste Hindus hurled abusive words at them. However, the Dalit people who wished to avoid trouble returned home peacefully after the police restrained them. As per the order of the High Court, Kandan, the victim, has again approached the Madras High Court and filed a case against 72 people under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The case is currently pending in the High Court.

Conclusion

Not only in the Melpathi, but in any recent caste problems, the government does not take immediate action and delays the problems. There is also a careless tendency for the ruling party to concentrate votes. It is not a difficult task for the government to make the Melpathi of Dalit people to enter the respective Draupadi Amman temple and worship. But by doing so, the government is afraid that they will incur the wrath of caste Hindus and lose their votes. That is why the temple has been locked as a temporary measure without concern for justice or social justice. It is the duty of the government to make the public understand equality, social justice, and reservation. Teachers and social activists have the responsibility to pass on all these to the next generation. We need to understand this and create an egalitarian society.

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