



Seeking Justice for the Original Tamil Inhabitants: The Kuravar Tribe Of Tamil Nadu

The people who lived in the hilly and mountainous region of Kurinji were known as 'Kunravars'. Later, they were known as 'Kuravars'. The 'testimony', which has been examining the deprived rights of nomadic tribes, the repression against the tribes and the government's negligence over the past years, held a discussion in Madurai to bring the results to the attention of the state. Marxist MLA-Vana Mahendran, Sampath of the Abolition of Untouchability Front and Shanmugam, the leader of the Marxist Party's Mountainous People's Association added spice to the discussion.



Family of Kuravar tribe (Photo source-Facebook)

The British, who wanted to build bungalows in the hills for their own entertainment, enacted the Forest Conservation Act in 1882 so that the people in the region would not be disturbed by it. Using it, the Britishers invaded the forests, driving out the real forest rangers, the Kuravar tribes. The Britishers exterminated the Kuravar race. The few Kuravars who were left became nomads. This was not completely their choice. The British forced them to change the identity of their domain in 1917, by violating the Criminal Traditions Act and by torturing them.

Furthermore, the Criminal Customs Act was principally a tool for instigating the Kuravars by the Britishers during the colonial era, however, the practice of degrading Kuravars is prevalent even today. To this day, phrases such as "Behaving like a Kuravan" are used by the police for those caught under suspicion. The police impose all sorts of robbery cases on the Kuravars as they wander around the town as astrologers, basket weavers and masonry professionals. "Although the Criminal Traditions Act was repealed after independence, the repression of the Kuravars still continues ..", exclaimed Kadir, the executive director of the organization called 'Evidence', who also listed other findings from the study.



(Photo source- Facebook)

Kuravars do not have any strong organisation. The government has divided them into 29 sections thereby making it impossible to improve their socio-economic conditions. The government has listed the 'Kuravars' as Scheduled Castes and the Mountain Kuravars as Scheduled Tribes, while the remaining 27 have been listed as 'Sirmarapinar'. As Kuravars, their identity is strictly that of a tribal. Why then are there so many divisions among the tribal community, institutionalized by the state?

Apart from these, forest produce is being leased to unknown people for harvesting. This kind of lease should be reserved for the Kuravars. The meeting called on the government to take legal action and declare all Kuravars as ethnic minorities and create resources for them.

In his inaugural address, Sampath, the state president of the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Abolition Front, said, "The vote bank of the tribals is only one percent in Tamil Nadu. Since only a small portion of them are ethnic minorities, the administrators do not give them due importance. The Sattanathan Commission, set up in 1970 to study the implementation of welfare schemes for backward people, 'declaring the Kuravar Community as Sirmarapinar' is a historical error that needs to be corrected by declaring the Kuravars as Tribes." The Ambasankar Commission set up in 1985 had stated the same thing.

MLA Mahendran also gave a fiery speech in the meeting. "Only VIPs can go to Perijam Lake in Kodaikanal with the permission of the DFO. When I was getting ready to leave there with proper permission, the District Forest Officer contacted me and said, 'Two High Court judges are staying there for relaxation and no one will be allowed till they leave!'. If an MLA is not able to go there today, one can imagine how much were the Kuravars oppressed during British rule?"

Similarly, even though the Criminal Inheritance Act has been abolished, the Tamil Nadu Police is still enforcing it. Natarajan, who was killed in a recent encounter, has been registered as 'Kura Natarajan' in all the documents including the FIR. "What does that mean? There have been 32 encounters in Tamil Nadu. This includes rowdies belonging to other non-criminal castes. Why don't they just mention their caste before the name like in the case of kuravars?" questioned MLA Mahendran.

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Puratchi Dasan, president of the Viduthalai Vengai Organisation, said, "the Kuravars are the original inhabitants of the land. They are the umbilical cord of today's Tamil people. Evidence for this can be found from the Tolkappiyam 2,500 years ago to the 11th century Kuttrala Kuravanji." He further added, "It is not

enough to declare us as Scheduled Tribes. Doubling what we have lost is the real meaning of social justice. We want justice!"

This meeting vividly portrayed the real situation of the Kuravara, the original Tamil inhabitants. In many parts of India, the indigeneous population or the original inhabitants, have historically been forced to leave their lands and forests, under the pretext of developmental projects, construction of dams, infrastructural facilities, etc. Hence, displacement and migration of the Adivasi/tribal population is a grave concern. It pushes them further into exploitation, by forcing them to abandon their way of lives and to fit into a commercialized, market-oriented, capitalist economy. This needs to come to an end. Tribals should not be evicted from their lands in the name of development.

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