



**A STUDY OF WASHERMEN COMMUNITY IN TIRUCHIRAPPALLI DISTRICT,
TAMIL NADU**

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The unorganised sector is diverse, comprising broadly three categories of workmen namely, the wage employed, the self employed and home based workers. The first National Commission on Labour (NCL) (1966-69) has defined unorganised labour as those who have not been able to organise themselves in pursuit of common objectives on account of constraints like casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small and scattered size of establishments and the position of power exercised over them by employers because of the nature of the industry. In the rural areas, the unorganised sector mainly comprises landless agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers, share croppers, those engaged in animal husbandry, poultry and fishing activities, rural artisans, forest workers, toddy tappers and domestic services etc. whereas in the urban areas it comprises mainly of manual labourers engaged in construction, carpentry, trade, transport, communication etc. and also it includes street vendors, hawkers, head load workers, garment makers and garment cleaners etc. According to NCL, 60 percent of the workers are self employed or home based and thus they are scattered over a wide area and it is very difficult to organise them. Trade unionism is also impossible in such informal employment. According to Trade union Act 1991, a worker cannot be eligible for trade union membership unless he or she is identified as employee of any employer. Identification in such sectors mentioned above is too complicated.

Unorganised Sector Worker's Bill

The Unorganised Sector Workers' Social Security Bill, 2007 aims to provide for social security and welfare of the unorganised sector workers and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. The Bill, *inter alia*, provides for the following matters, namely:- (i) The Central Government shall constitute a National Social Security Advisory Board to recommend suitable welfare schemes for different sections of unorganised sector workers, and upon consideration of these recommendations, the Central Government may notify suitable welfare schemes relating to life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, or any other benefits. (ii) The State Government shall constitute the State Social Security Advisory Board to recommend suitable welfare schemes for different sections of unorganised workers in

that State and the State Government may notify suitable schemes for one or more sections of the unorganised workers. (iii) A worker of an unorganised sector shall be eligible for social security benefits if, he is duly registered. Every registered worker in the unorganised sector shall be issued an identity card which shall be a smart card carrying a unique identification number and shall be portable. (iv) The Central Government and the State Government shall have the power to make rules for the purposes of carrying out the objects of the Bill.

According to the Directorate of Evaluation and Applied Research, the organised sector employed has come down strikingly from 25 lakhs in 2001-02 to 24.2 lakhs in 2002 -03 and 22.83 lakhs in 2003-04 and it is estimated as 20 lakhs for 2006-07. In the study, where as the unorganised sector employment was 210.54 lakhs in 1999-2000 and the projected employment in unorganised sector in 233.94 lakhs in 2006-07. However current statistics were not updated in this aspect.

The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) carried out its 61st Round sample survey in 2004-05 and its results showed that out of the total workforce of 457.5 million in the country, only 62.6 million workers are employed in the organised sector and the remaining 394.9 million are workers in the unorganised sector, of which a large number of about 237 million are engaged in agriculture. Out of the rest, 41 million work in manufacturing, 37 million each in services and trade, and around 17 million in construction.

Two National Labour Commissions, along with several other international and national commissions, committees and conferences in the last 50 years have documented the socio-economic conditions of workers in the unorganised sector in India. The latest is the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2007), also known as the Arjun Sengupta Committee, which submitted its report to the Government of India in 2006.

The Committee's report estimated that there are over 340 million (approximately 34 to 37 crore) workers in the unorganised sector in India , and that they contribute around 60% to the national economic output of the country. Around 28 crore work in the rural sector, of which an estimated 22 crore are in the agricultural sector. Around 6 crore are in urban areas. Women make up 11-12 crore, of which around 8 crore are engaged in agriculture.

A recent report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS, 2007) says that 79% of the 395 million workers in this sector live on an income of less than Rs 20 a day -- and that the total number of Indians living with this amount is 836 million. Approximately 28 million people who work in the organised sector work as informal workers, with the same uncertainties of employment as the unorganised sector. This means a total of about 423 million, or at least 90% of India's workers. The report speaks of the "utterly deplorable" conditions in this sector, where workers have "extremely few livelihood options".

LEGISLATIVE PROTECTION

The Government has taken various initiatives through enactment of legislations, creation of welfare funds, spreading workers education and through supporting non-governmental organisations to bring this deprived class into the mainstream of our work force. Some of the important legislations which help unorganised workers are as under:-

- Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
- Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923.

- Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
- The Employees State Insurance Act, 1948.
- Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976.
- Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act, 1970.
- Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979.

WASHERMEN COMMUNITY:

India is home to the world's largest population of unorganized labour. Unorganized labour is an unprotected labour. Poverty and unemployment have compelled them to work. Washermen and barbers are the two categories who are traditionally occupied in services, which are basic to social life. Washermen are important occupational class. The profession is very popular in the villages as well as in the town. A washerman in India is popularly known as a "dhobi" or "dhobie". The name dhobi is derived from the Hindi dhona (to wash). Dhobis are an occupational caste grouping, and usually operate from door to door collecting dirty linen from households. They are identified as khamkar / kamkarnewala. (W.H.Wiser,1988).Traditionally, the community would wash clothes for particular families (Jajman), and would receive grain and services from them. But with the growth of the cash economy, most Dhobi are now paid money for their services. In rural areas during the festival time, where animal sacrifice is practiced the conductors of the ceremony used to gift goat to washermen first, and the barbers get next. There is an interesting story regarding the origin of washermen in Sivapurana, a saivite religious text in Tamil. When Thakkan was doing yagna, Veerabadra appeared and destroyed the yagna. After the destruction of yagna, he found blood drops in his clothes. In order to wash it, he created a washerman from his chest. Thirukurippu Thondar one nayanmar of theamong sixty-four nayanmars. He belongs to the dhobi community.

CLOTHES WASHING PROCESS

Washing process takes three days. First day they collect the clothes, mark it, sort out, soak it, and steam it. The second day work involves washing, blueing bleaching and starching and drying of the clothes. And in the third day they iron the clothes and return back the clothes to their customer. Washer men/women are engaged in all the stages of washing, starting from the collection of clothes, marking it, sorting it out, soaking the clothes, steaming (bhuti) the clothes blueing, bleaching, starching the clothes, washing it, drying it and delivering it. There are no certain cultural restrictions imposed on women to undertake certain activities.

THE PROBLEM

Self-employment plays a significant role and both educated and uneducated people enter into the avenues of self-employment. Jobs under self-employment vary from yielding low level to high level income. Often the low-level self-employment focuses more on the hereditary vocations. Washermen are one such type who are hereditarily forced to engage in washing the soiled clothes. The invention of modern technology and their accessibility towards the electric gadgets like washing machines, electrical iron box etc. has pushed the washermen to a more deplorable condition. (In towns & cities many other caste groups also taken up this occupation). The development of mass media majority of advertisement related to detergent / washing powder for easy wash and promises won't burn the fingers. These changes affected them a lot economically, socially and culturally. This necessitates the need to understand the washermen community rendering services to both rural and urban population in the modern term of unorganised sector where and how they fit in the social system. Hence, the researcher study on

the socio economic status, living, working conditions and various factors affecting the washermen in Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil Nadu.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the socio-economic conditions of washermen community.
2. To study the various factors affecting washermen community.

UNIVERSE & SAMPLING

There is no reliable information available about the details of population involved in washing clothes in Tiruchirappalli and surroundings. As per oral record, there are 10,000 washermen families living on Kavari Riverbank, Ariamangalam and Vannarapettai. The researcher collected information from seventy five respondents for the present study by simple random, availability sampling techniques method by interviewing who ever available during the time of data collection.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study is descriptive research design in nature, because the characteristics, which are essential for the same like observation, recording, analysis and interpretation of the socio-economic conditions and the status of washermen community that exist at the present juncture have been covered.

TOOLS OF ANALYSIS:

The primary data collected from the respondents were statistically processed and tabulated leading to analysis. In this process simple statistical techniques like averages and percentage were used.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

TABLE-1

RESPONDENTS BY FAMILY TYPE

S.No.	Family type	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Nuclear	71	94.7
2.	Joint	04	5.3
Total		75	100.0

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

The basic social unit family becomes the primary one maintaining the relationship and social activities of the individuals. The system of family leads the individuals to a better life and shapes their attitudes towards goal achievements. In the present study it is observed that among the respondents a majority proportion (94.7 %) belong to nuclear family type and followed by them 5.3 % percent are belonging to Joint family.

Table-2

RESPONDENTS BY AGE AND SEX

S.No	Age	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
1.	21 – 30	5	8	13	17.3
2.	31 – 40	10	22	32	42.7
3.	41- 50	12	9	21	28.0
4.	50 and above	3	6	9	12.0
	Total	30	45	75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

The above table shows that two third of the respondents (60 %) are female and the remaining respondents (40 %). Thus females are more than males. The respondents belong to four groups in term of age. The entire range is between 21 to 55 years. The biggest age groups among the four are 31-40 years. They constitute more than one third (42.7 %) of the sample. The next bigger group is between 41-50 years which constitute slightly more than one fourth (28 %). This is followed by the next group which is between 21-30 years (17.3 %) and the last age group 50 and above 12 %.

Table-3

RESPONDENTS BY EDUCATION AND SEX

S.No.	Educational Status	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
1.	Primary	8	15	23	30.7
2.	Middle and Secondary	7	8	15	20
3.	Illiterate	15	22	37	49.3
	Total	30	45	75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Table-3 shows distribution of the respondents according to their educational attainment. 49.3 % of them were illiterate followed by 30.7 % of the respondents have attained primary middle school level education only. 20% respondents have attained middle and secondary school level education. The understanding drawn from this table is that majority (49.3 %) of the respondents belong to illiterate category.

Table-4
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO THEIR FAMILY SIZE

S.No.	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	1-3 persons	12	16.0
2.	4 – 6 persons	55	73.3
3.	Above 6 persons	08	10.7
Total		75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

The table-4 percents distribution of the respondents according to their family size More number of persons in a family leads to more family size. The present study reveals that majority (73.3%) of the respondents had 4-6 members in the family, and 16.0% of the respondents had 1-3 members. Whereas remaining 10.7% of the respondents had above 6 members in the family. Thus, a majority of washermen community families are medium size (4-6 persons).

Table-5
RESPONDENTS BY TYPE OF HOUSE

Sl.No.	House	House type			Total
		Thatched	Tiled	Concrete	
1.	Own	05 (15.6%)	19 (59.4%)	08 (25 %)	32 (100.0 %)
2.	Rented	---	05 (35.7%)	09 (64.3 %)	14 (100.0 %)
3.	Govt.	----	----	29 (100.0 %)	29 (100.0 %)
Total		05 (6.7 %)	24 (32 %)	46 (61.3 %)	75 (100.0 %)

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Type of house is another important variable. Generally, the type of the houses was classified into thatched, tiles, concrete which indicates the socio-economic condition of the respondents. From the above table one can understand that majority of the respondents (61.3 %) in the washermen community are living in concrete houses, 32 % percent respondents were living in the tiles house and another 6.7 % respondents were living in the Thatched house.42.7 % have built it themselves and 38.7 % are built by the Government and Remaining 18.7 % resides in rental house.

Table-6
INCOME PARTICULAR OF THE RESPONDENTS FAMILY

S.No.	Category (Rs) (per month)	No. of respondents	Percentage
1.	Below – 5000	35	46.7
2.	5001- 6000	27	36.0
3.	Above – 6000	13	17.3
Total		75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

The above table shows that income particular of the respondents family 46.7% of the respondents had monthly income below Rs. 5000. 36.0% had income between Rs.5001 and 6000, another 17.3% respondents had per month income of Rs.6000 and above. Most of the respondents (46.7%) earned per months income below Rs. 5000.

Table-7
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENT ACCORDING TO SOURCE OF CREDIT

S.No.	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Money lender	31	41.3
2.	Relatives	24	32.0
3.	No debt	20	26.7
Total		75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Table-7 reveals the source of credit of the total respondents 26.7 % fall under no debt category 41.3% percent mainly depended upon the money lenders and remaining 32.0% getting their debt from relatives. The non-availability of Institutionalized credit and for away location of the sources founded than to rely on money lenders through they charge exorbitant interest.

Table-8
DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS BY REASON FOR CHOOSING WASHING WORK

S.No.	Category	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1.	Hereditary	36	48
2.	Compulsion	12	16
3.	Illiterate	15	20
4.	Family needs	12	16
Total		75	100

Source: Compiled from Primary Data

Table-8 explains the reasons for choosing this washing work. About 48 percent said hereditary, followed by 20 per cent of the respondent stated that compulsion. 16 % illiterate and family needs to choose washing work. The majority (52 %) of respondents choosing of this occupation is due to the illiteracy, compulsion and family needs.

Table-9

DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS BY GENDER AND JOB SATISFACTION

S.No	Educational Status	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
1.	Yes	14	32	46	61.3
2.	No	16	13	29	38.7
	Total	30	45	75	100

Source: Complied from Primary Data

This table indicates that more than half proportions of the respondents (61.3%) are satisfied with their occupation because of independent work and 38.7 % of the respondents feel dissatisfaction due to income and social upliftment.

HEALTH PROBLEMS OF THE WASHERMEN COMMUNITY:

Human resource development is fostered by a mosaic of factors such as education, health, water supply and housing which constitute the basic needs. The economic characteristic of developing countries if reflected in their health characteristics. Good health is a crucial part of well being. But spending on health care also must be justified purely socio-economic ground. Good health if fundamental to every men, women and child not only for well being, but also for their survival. The constrains in health as experienced by washermen community, they are generally affected like Peptic Ulcer, Mouth ulcer, lung problem, low pressure, water related diseases, allergic problems, tuberculosis and elephantiasis.

THE LIFE OF WASHERMEN COMMUNITY:

The washermen’s start their work early in the morning at 4 o’clock itself. They have to go in the early morning itself to avoid the scorching sun. They used to finish most of their work before 12 o’clock. In some of the families, if two or more persons are involved in washing, they divide their responsibilities such as washing, blueing, bleaching, drying and folding. By this way they can do their work fast. In some rare cases, only one person attends all these works. They wash each and every cloth by beating on the rock. They are following this method to remove the dirt in the clothes. While beating the clothes, they raise special musical sound such as “chu-chu” to relieve them from the tiredness. The sorting of the dried clothes is done in the washing place itself. Washermen’s bring the washer clothes to their home and iron every clothes. Washermen’s collect uniform charges either fixed by themselves or suggested by the union. The earlier days washermen’s social and economic status was assessed based on the number of donkeys hepossessed that indirectly indicate the number of customers, the volume of cloth he was receiving. Due to over population, more vehicles in the street and traffic jam, they are unable to use the donkeys in cities. The raw material related problem are high price of raw materials like, soap powder, washing soda, soap oil, castic soda, bleaching powder, whitners, starch and lack of

charcoal, also electric iron. To buy all these items they have to spend half of their income and it affects their meeting day to day needs. The rural washermen's conditions are really pitiable. Many of the washermen's family migrated to the towns and changed their occupation. They prefer to go for construction work, house hold work ,daily wagers in vegetable market & grocery shops etc.

BASED UPON THE STUDY THE FINDINGS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

This study attempts to obtain the picture of condition of washermen community socio economic condition.

1. Majority of the respondents (94.7 %) belong to nuclear family type 6.3% are belonging to joint family.
2. 42.7 % of the respondents belong to age group of 31-40 years.
3. 42.7 % of the respondents have own house.
4. 61.3% of the respondents were living in the concrete house.
5. 49.3 % of the respondents are illiterates.
6. Majority (73.3 %) of the respondents families are medium size (4 -6 persons).
7. More than half of the respondents (78.6 % percent) belong to the backward class.
8. Majority of the respondents family members (65%) had their education upto High school and above.
9. 46.7% of the respondent's monthly income is below Rs. 5000.
10. Total asset value of respondents (57 %) is Rs.1, 00,000 and above.
11. Majority of the respondents (35.6 %) don't have saving habits.
12. 73.3 % of respondents have debts.
13. 41.3 % of respondents replied that money lenders are the main source of their credit.
14. Majority (52.4%) have bad habits like, smoking, tobacco, alcoholism etc.,
15. It is found that, hereditary (48 %), the majority (52 %) of respondents choosing this occupation is due to illiteracy, compulsion and family needs.
16. 61.3% the respondents are satisfied with their occupation.

SUGGESTIONS

The study would like to suggest the following based on the observation that was made when the research was conducted.

1. The government should provide special reservations for education and employment to washermen community.
2. Create awareness among washermen's community through health education, counseling and Vocational Training.
3. To enhance their economic position the concept of self help group should be introduced and strengthened among washermen's community.
4. National and International philanthropist organization like Lions club, Rotary club etc., should come forward take these area as command area.
5. Provide loan and minimum pension for washermen's community.
6. The government can take serious steps by providing raw material for subsidy price.

CONCLUSION

Washermen communities in rural areas were placed with in social status in all homes during family ceremonies. They were the messengers for carrying good and bad news in the

families to their relative's places in the nearby villages. Washermen receives first respect in the villages even today. But in the cities it has changed. Majority of the washermen started realizing that their living conditions through washing can't be improved drastically. Washing occupation is a type of subsistence work. They can exist, they can keep their body and soul by doing this work, but they can't improve like others.

People started using washing machine and commercial detergents, these changes compelled householder to go for self washing and used domestic servants for washing purpose. So they are forced to try for alternative opportunities. To seek alternatives, the basic thing they want is to provide education to their children. They feel that education may widen the job opportunities for them. Washermen's community will have to go a long way to improve their social status. For the washermen's community's improvement Government and other NGO's should strive in more than one ways.

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