

An Analysis on Caste Practices and the Vulnerabilities Faced by Burial Ground Workers in Sivagangai District, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract:

Tamil Nadu is a state combined with multi-religious, multi-ethnic and inequality. Formally, Caste is being an indispensable part of cremation process. Whether it is traditional or new techniques it all based on the caste practices followed by each community. The aim of the study is to analysis the caste practices and the vulnerabilities faced by cremation ground workers. It deals with the burying process and preparation of crematorium. The purpose of this analysis is to examine the status and caste differences faced by the crematorium workers in Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu. The objectives of the Study have discussed to study the discrimination faced by burial ground workers. To analysis the impact of discrimination and the status of crematory workers. To Enact an inclusive policy to build up the marginalized cremation workforce in Sivagangai District of Tamil Nadu. Result of the study implementing the policy measures to create a more inclusive, social and economic equality for the burial ground workers, addressing longstanding gender and caste disparities. These policies aim to create a more inclusive and equitable environment for burial ground workers by addressing gender and caste disparities. Formalizing employment, enacting anti-discrimination laws, and ensuring job security will offer stability and recognition for those in this essential industry, fostering social justice and equality. Findings of the study on Caste intersects with class, gender, and religion, creating complex layers of discrimination that particularly affect burial ground workers, who often face social stigma and marginalization. Predominantly from lower caste, these workers endure systemic discrimination, low wages, job insecurity, and significant occupational hazards, such as exposure to pathogens and harsh working conditions, all while playing a crucial role in public health and the execution of cultural and religious rituals. Living in segregated communities, their families experience social ostracism and limited access to essential services, yet they demonstrate resilience through community solidarity, with local organizations advocating for their rights and improved conditions. Conclusion of the study have the caste system's deep-rooted influence continues to affect Indian society, highlighting the need for ongoing efforts toward social justice. Burial ground workers play a critical, yet often overlooked, role,

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facing social stigma and poor working conditions. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal, social, and economic interventions. Recognizing their contributions and vulnerabilities has been essential for fostering greater inclusivity and equality in the society. This study emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and supporting these workers to promote social progress.

Keywords: Burial Ground Workers, Caste, Discrimination, Vulnerabilities, Challenges, Demonstrate Resilience, Low Wage, Job Insecurity

Introduction:

The caste system is a traditional social stratification of primarily found in South Asia, especially India. It divides society into hierarchical groups based on their occupation and social status. The caste system has been a subject of significant social, economic, and political impact in the regions where it is practiced. Burial ground workers, often referred to as gravediggers or cemetery workers, play a crucial role in managing and maintaining burial sites. Their responsibilities typically include digging graves, maintaining the grounds, and sometimes assisting with the burial process. Cremation and burial of the dead is a 'traditional' occupation, which already tends to attract informality employment, facilities are owned and operated by government or private trusts. The Government inaction has affected these workers manifold. Burial ground workers, often belonging to marginalized castes, face significant social, economic, and health-related vulnerabilities. This study aims to discuss the impact of caste-based discrimination on these workers and identify the specific challenges they encounter in their profession. This profession, while essential, often remains underappreciated and can involve physically demanding and emotionally challenging tasks. Historically, burial ground workers have been integral to funeral traditions across cultures and religions. In many societies, they occupy a unique social position, sometimes facing social stigma due to the nature of their work. This stigma can be more pronounced in regions with rigid social hierarchies, such as those influenced by the caste system in India, where burial ground workers are often from marginalized communities. Despite the challenges, burial ground workers provide a vital public service. They ensure that burial grounds are respectful and dignified spaces for mourning and remembrance. Their work requires not only physical labor but also a degree of sensitivity and respect for the deceased and their families. Modern advancements have introduced mechanized equipment to assist with some of the tasks traditionally performed manually, improving efficiency and safety for burial ground workers.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the study are to analyse the identity of the burial ground workers. The specific objectives of the study are following

- To study the discrimination of burial ground workers in Sivagangai District.
- To analysis the impact of discrimination and the status of crematory workers in Sivagangai District.
- To Enact an inclusive policy to build up the marginalized cremation workforce in Sivagangai District.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the caste-based discrimination and vulnerabilities experienced by burial ground workers. The methodology has been described to address the primary research question:

"How do caste-based practices influence the lives and working conditions of burial ground workers?". For an effective study the researcher takes Sivagangai district as a study area. There are totally nine Taluks in Sivagangai district. This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach, focusing on the lived experiences of burial ground workers. Primary data were collected from burial ground workers through interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews conducted to gather detailed narratives. Observations made at burial grounds to understand the daily challenges and interactions. Purposive sampling ensures a diverse range of selected sample respondents. For an effective study the researcher takes convenience sampling method. The researcher takes 100 burial ground workers as a sample size. Informed consent obtained from all participants. Data are anonymized to protect participants' identities. The study's findings may be limited to the specific regions and may not be generalization to all burial ground workers. Conduct in-depth interviews with burial ground workers to gather personal narratives and experiences. Engage in ethnographic fieldwork in burial grounds to observe daily routines and interactions. The Researcher have been focused on burial ground workers and community leaders. Distribute structured questionnaires to burial ground workers to collect demographic data and information on working conditions. Statistical tools had been used to analyze survey data and identify patterns of vulnerability.

Review of literature:

A review of literature on the caste system encompasses various academic disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, history, and political science. The literature can be broadly categorized into historical analyses, sociological studies, critiques by social reformers, and contemporary perspectives on the persistence of caste-based discrimination.

Nicholas Dirks (2001) discussed that "Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India" argues that British colonial rule played a significant role in dignifying and codifying the caste system. **Human Rights Watch's (2007)** reported that "Hidden Apartheid: Caste Discrimination Against India's Untouchables" documents ongoing caste-based discrimination and violence in India. This book discusses how caste continues to affect various aspects of Indian society, including political, economic and social relations, as clarified in **S. Anand's (2018)** analyzed "Caste Matters". **Suraj Yengde's (2019)** made out on "Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents" explores the ongoing struggles of Dalits (formerly known as "untouchables") and the intersections of caste with other identities and discriminations. **Jessica Mitford's (2000)** reviewed on "The American Way of Death Revisited" critiques the funeral industry, offering insights into the often-hidden labor of burial ground workers. **Gopal Guru's (2001)** "Dalits in the Graveyard: The Politics of Burial and Social Exclusion" explores the intersection of caste and occupation, particularly focusing on Dalits (formerly "untouchables") who work in graveyards in India. In **Werner Keller's (2008)** "Burial Practices and the Role of Gravedigger in Different Cultures", Keller explores how different cultures view and treat grave workers, revealing significant variations and common challenges. **Alpa Shah's (2010)** "In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India" provides a case study on marginalized communities, including burial ground workers, and their struggles for social and economic justice. **Alison C. Meyer's (2014)** "Grave Diggers and Their Forgotten Contributions to Society" discussed the historical and contemporary significance of grave diggers, emphasizing their often-overlooked societal contributions. In **Thomas Laqueur's (2015)** "The

Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains," Laqueur provided a detailed historical account of how societies treat the dead, highlighting the essential role of burial workers. **World Health Organization (WHO) Reports on Burial Practices and Public Health (2017)** reported highlight the importance of safe and dignified burial practices, particularly during health crises like the Ebola outbreak. **"Report of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes"(2020)** revealed that data on the socio-economic status of Scheduled Castes and the effectiveness of affirmative action policies. **International Labour Organization (ILO) "Working Conditions of Gravediggers: A Report" (2021)** provided data on the occupational hazards faced by burial ground workers and recommendations for improving their working conditions. **Divyachandrababu's(2023)** Hindustan Times "In some Tamil Nadu Villages, Caste bias Overshadows death" enumerated a study on caste-based discrimination faced by a marginalized people even after their death. She marked that a big patch of land is used for burying, but the entrance of the village's burial ground is reserved for the dominant caste and the scheduled caste people are relegated to bury in the separate patch of land. They need to walk on the separate mud road and they should enter only from the back. The deprived people were also tired of questioning them.

Research Gap:

While existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the caste system's historical roots, its perpetuation in contemporary Indian society, and the specific challenges faced by marginalized communities, there remains a research gap in exploring the nuanced intersection of caste, occupation, and public health in the context of burial ground workers. Although several works address the socio-economic and cultural aspects of caste discrimination, there is limited focus on the lived experiences of burial ground workers, particularly in terms of their occupational hazards, mental health, and the specific impact of caste-based discrimination on their families and communities. Additionally, while international perspectives on burial practices are explored, there is a need for more in-depth comparative analysis of how these practices and associated stigmas vary across different regions and cultures within India. Further research is required to address these gaps, particularly in understanding how policy interventions can effectively address the multi-layered vulnerabilities of burial ground workers in a caste-driven society.

Caste Practices Followed in Thiruppuvanam Taluk:

During July 6, 2024, we have visited Thiruppuvanam Taluk of Sivaganga for collecting data about the caste practices and discrimination they have been facing due to this work. In Madapuram, The people who works at the crematorium at said that two families alternately working each year is doing the crematorium and cremation. They said that they only do work such as cremation of corpses, maintenance of the burial ground, and make a living by doing other daily jobs when they are not working in the burial ground. They maintain three burial ground around their center. They will not do cremation work for Nadar community and they will only do cremation work for people in other communities. They also said that the people of the Nadar community were burnt by other people. They were saddened saying that many incidents have been happening to reduce the public respect of their work and they are walking around here without being able to listen to it. Later, we went to Thiruppuvanam area. A total of two burial grounds have been used for cremation in Thiruppuvanam. One is near the bus stop which is now not been used by public due to road

construction and another one is a beautiful in-built place used for cremation works surrounded with grove and garden. It is maintained by the Nadar community people. They are collecting Rs. 2,500 for cremation in burial ground and Rs. 3,500 for burial process through digging.

Caste Practices Followed in Thiruppachetthi Taluk:

In Thiruppachetthi village, totally two burial ground are presently active for cremation works. These are divided on the basis of community. For particular set of community people, the burial ground is located near to the village and for another community people the burial ground is located far away from village. Four members working for this burial ground. These four will do all kind of crematorium works in both cremation center. We have been collecting data and we have realized that there is a caste difference prevailing in that area where one community lives in one place and another community lives on the other side of the road. Crematoriums are also located in two different places which are not sharing a same space.



Caste practices Followed in Manamadurai Taluk:

In Manamadurai village, two burial ground along with one gasifier crematorium are currently present for doing cremation works. Residents said that the gas crematorium was not fully functional and was only operated on demand from time to time and the bodies were cremated in the nearby burial ground.



Caste Practices Followed in Sivaganga Taluk:

In Sivaganga village, we visited gasifier crematorium which is commonly called by the name “**Therkku Mayaanam**” by the area people. Two male workers are working in this crematorium area. They both belong to the same family. This post is running with LPG adaptation. There is no separate salary for them. They said that they earn money through the family member of the corpses by doing the work the dead body and the kudimagam.



Caste Practices Followed in Singampuneri Taluk:

In Singampuneri village, three burial ground are functioning in Singampuneri village. Two of them are operating at the same place and the other one is inside the town. The reason for that is that segregation is being done separately for a certain community within the town and for other communities. Similarly, two different families work for the two braziers.



Caste Practices Followed in Karaikudi Taluk:

In Karaikudi Taluk, there is a disused burial ground and another is a wood fired electric gas cremation centre. It is maintained by a woman and her family members also live there to help her and are engaged in maintenance of the cremation ground and cleaning of the place. There is only an electric gas crematorium here. There is no traditional burning facility here. Those who want to do so should go to the burial ground in the city which is not in use.

Caste Practices Followed in Devakottai Taluk:

In Devakottai Taluk, apart from public crematorium, an electric crematorium has also been constructed. However, the people living near here have fought against this electric incinerator and stopped its operations. Because of that, they said, the heavy smoke emitted by the cremation ground during the burying process of dead body will cause asthma, chest irritation and some other health problems and the people living nearby will suffer from the diseases caused by the environmental pollution. However, some people who were there protested against this electric cremation platform because it meant that they should be cremated at the same place without caste discrimination.

Table and Interpretation:

The following table shows the highlights of the survey.

Table 1.1 Distribution of respondents by occupation and their caste

Occupation	Gender			Caste						Total
	Male	Female	Total	SC	S T	BC	MB C	OC	others	
Navidhan	16	--	16	9	--	5	--	--	2	16
Barber	20	--	20	7	--	6	3	3	1	20
Conch player	9	--	9	3	--	4	1	--	1	9
In charge	13	--	13	8	--	5	--	--	--	13
Funeral arrangers	15	1	16	16	--	--	--	--	--	16
Care Taker	12	--	12	12	--	--	--	--	--	12
Clergy services	14	--	14	7	--	4	--	3	--	14
TOTAL	99	01	100	62	--	24	04	06	04	100
PERCENTAGE	99%	1%	100%	62%	--	24%	4%	6%	4%	100%

(Sources: Primary Data)

The table shows that the detailed view of the distribution of respondents by occupation, gender and caste categories (SC, ST, BC, MBC, OC, others). Scheduled Castes (SC) constitute the largest group with 62 respondents (62%), significantly represented in various occupations. Backward Classes (BC) follow with 24 respondents (24%), while Most Backward Classes (MBC) have 04 (4%), Open category includes 6 respondents whereas others include 4 respondents spread over different occupations. The data shows that the significant gender difference, with 99 male respondents and 1 female respondent. The table shows that various occupations such as Navidhan, Barber, Conch Player, Incharge, Funeral Arrangers Care Taker and Clergy Services having only male respondents. Demographic insights highlight socio-economic and caste

dynamics within specific occupational groups, with occupations such as Navidhan, Conch Player and Barber showing varying representation among different caste groups, while others such as caretakers and in-charges have more concentrated populations. This information can inform policies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion across various professions and caste groups, particularly the representation of marginalized communities such as SC and STs. In conclusion, the table shows that the as a structured representation of the distribution of respondents across occupations and caste categories, highlighting demographic patterns, significant gender disparities, and areas where diversity and representation require further study. This can be valuable for understanding social dynamics and guiding policy decisions to promote inclusion and equality across different occupational groups.

Findings

1. Caste intersects with other forms of identity, including class, gender, and religion, creating complex layers of discrimination and privilege.
2. Many burial ground workers face social stigma and marginalization, often linked to broader issues of caste, class, and ethnicity.
3. Burial ground workers face significant occupational hazards, including exposure to pathogens and harsh working conditions.
4. Their role in maintaining public health, particularly during health crises, underscores the need for better support and recognition.
5. Burial ground workers ensure the proper execution of cultural and religious death rituals, highlighting their indispensable societal role.
6. Burial ground workers, predominantly from lower castes (Dalits), face systemic discrimination in society. Social stigma associated with death and impurity exacerbates their marginalization.
7. Low wages and lack of job security are prevalent among burial ground workers. Limited access to financial services and social security benefits increases their economic instability.
8. Burial ground workers are exposed to occupational hazards, including handling of decomposing bodies and exposure to infectious diseases. Lack of proper protective equipment and medical facilities heightens health risks.
9. Burial ground workers often live in segregated communities, facing social ostracism and limited access to public services. Their children also face discrimination in education and social interactions.
10. Despite challenges, burial ground workers exhibit resilience through community solidarity and collective action. Local organizations and NGOs play a crucial role in advocating for their rights and improving working conditions.

Conclusion

The literature on the caste system reveals its deep-rooted influence on Indian societies and its persistent impact on social, economic, and political life. While significant progress has been made in addressing caste-based discrimination, the system's legacy continues to pose challenges, necessitating ongoing efforts for social justice and equality. The literature on burial ground workers reveals their critical yet often overlooked role in society. Addressing the social stigma and improving the working conditions of these workers is

essential for recognizing their contributions and ensuring their well-being. Through historical, sociological, and public health lenses, the literature underscores the need for greater appreciation and support for burial ground workers. This study sheds light on the deep-seated caste practices that perpetuate vulnerabilities among burial ground workers. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that combines legal, social, and economic interventions. By acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges faced by burial ground workers, society can move towards greater inclusive and equality.

Policy Recommendation:

These policy recommendations aim to address the deep-seated gender and caste inequalities in burial ground-related occupations. By promoting inclusive, offering targeted support, and ensuring legal protections, the goal is to create a more equitable and just environment where all individuals, regardless of gender or caste, can participate and thrive in these essential roles.

- To promote Awareness and Sensitization Campaigns.
- To provide safety and support mechanism.
- To give Incentives for workers.
- To implement reservation policies.
- To encourage Inter-Caste Collaboration.
- To provide Educational Support for burial ground workers.
- To formalize Employment Contracts.
- To enact Anti-Discrimination Laws.
- To implement guaranteed job security for individuals who have been involved in burial ground-related occupations across generations.

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