

Socio-Cultural And Economic Dynamics of The Arunthathiyar Community in South India: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract—The Arunthathiyar community represents a historically marginalized sub-group within Scheduled Castes in South India, predominantly situated in Tamil Nadu. Positioned at the complex intersection of social exclusion, occupational segregation, and economic vulnerability, the community faces distinct socio-cultural and structural challenges. This research paper critically examines the socio-cultural identity formation, historical-occupational trajectories, and contemporary economic status of the Arunthathiyar community. Furthermore, it evaluates the impact of state policy interventions particularly targeted affirmative action, such as the 3% internal sub-quota on social mobility, educational attainment, and economic diversification. Utilizing a qualitative socio-analytical framework based on secondary literature, historical records, and policy reports, this study highlights persistent structural barriers and offers actionable policy recommendations to foster sustainable socio-economic empowerment.

Index Terms—Arunthathiyar Community, Socio-Cultural Identity, Economic Mobility, Affirmative Action, Internal Sub-Quota, Labor Market Segregation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social stratification in India has long influenced the distribution of economic resources, political power, and social capital. Within the broader framework of Scheduled Castes (SC), structural inequalities are not uniform; rather, sub-caste hierarchies often result in internal marginalization. The Arunthathiyar community a collective term encompassing traditional occupational groups such as the Chakkiliyar, Madiga, Pagadai, Thoti, and Adi Andhra-constitutes one of the most socio-economically vulnerable segments in Tamil Nadu and neighboring South Indian regions.

Historically tied to leatherworking, cobbling, sanitation work, and agricultural daily-wage labor, the Arunthathiyars have endured socio-spatial segregation and limited access to formal education and land ownership. While state-level developmental initiatives and affirmative action have provided avenues for vertical social mobility, systemic challenges remain embedded in rural and urban socio-economic structures. This paper aims to analyze the socio-cultural identity, economic conditions, and policy landscape shaping the contemporary lives of the Arunthathiyar community.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this study are structured as follows:

1. To trace the socio-cultural evolution and identity assertion movements among the Arunthathiyar community.
2. To analyze the economic status, occupational shift, and labor market vulnerabilities of Arunthathiyar households.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of government welfare schemes and internal reservation policies in facilitating social mobility.
4. To identify key policy interventions required for holistic socio-economic empowerment.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an analytical and descriptive methodology based on secondary qualitative data. Source materials include peer-reviewed academic journals, historical texts, state government

commission reports (such as the Janarthanam Commission report), census data, and publications from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on human rights and social justice. The qualitative framework synthesizes sociological theories of marginality, intersectionality, and labor economics.

IV. SOCIO-CULTURAL PROFILE AND IDENTITY ASSERTIONS

4.1 Historical Identity and Nomenclature

The term Arunthathiyar gained prominent official and social recognition through early 20th-century advocacy efforts aimed at unifying several sub-castes under a dignified collective name. Key reformers, notably Rao Sahib L.C. Gurusamy and early leaders of the Arunthathiyar Mahajana Sabha, challenged pejorative designations and sought institutional recognition.

The community's historical migration patterns across Telugu, Kannada, and Tamil-speaking regions created a unique multilingual identity (predominantly speaking Telugu or Kannada at home while adopting Tamil as their civic language in Tamil Nadu).

4.2 Cultural Traditions, Deities, and Hero Worship

The socio-cultural fabric of the Arunthathiyar community is rich in oral literature, folk art forms, and distinct religious practices. Unlike mainstream dominant caste rituals, Arunthathiyar cultural practices center around guardian deities and folk traditions:

- Folk Iconography:

Repertoires of oral histories honor historical figures and folk heroes such as Madurai Veeran, Ondiveeran (a key commander in the anti-colonial army of Pooli Thevar), and Kuyili (the warrior-commander who led the army of Velu Nachiyar). These figures symbolize historical agency, military valor, and resistance.

- Village Festivals:

Local folk traditions, including the veneration of village deities (Amman and local hero stones), serve as sites of community cohesion and socio-cultural expression.

4.3 Socio-Spatial Segregation

A critical dimension of the community's social condition is spatial segregation. In rural areas, residential spaces remain largely divided into main villages and segregated settlements, commonly referred to as Colonies or Cherais. This spatial distance often correlates with reduced access to basic civic amenities, clean drinking water, proper sanitation, and quality public infrastructure.

V. ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS

5.1 Occupational Trajectory and Labor Dynamics

The traditional economy of the Arunthathiyars was built around leather crafts, cobbling, domestic servitude, manual sanitation, and agricultural labor. Industrial developments in the late 20th century transformed these livelihood patterns:

1. Decline of Traditional Leather Crafts: Mechanization, commercial leather tanneries, and factory-based production severely displaced independent artisan cobblers and small-scale leather tanners.
2. Shift to the Unorganized Informal Sector: Lacking capital and agricultural land, many displaced workers transitioned into agricultural day labor, brick kiln work, construction work, municipal sanitation, and manual labor in textile or manufacturing hubs (e.g., Tiruppur, Coimbatore, and Erode).

5.2 Landlessness and Asset Deficit

Economic vulnerability among Arunthathiyars is closely tied to high rates of landlessness. The lack of productive agricultural land or real estate assets limits agricultural income generation and restricts access to institutional credit from banks, leaving households vulnerable to high-interest informal debt cycles.

VI. POLICY INTERVENTIONS AND IMPACT ANALYSIS

To address the historical sub-marginalization of the community within the Scheduled Caste category, the Government of Tamil Nadu enacted the Tamil Nadu Arunthathiyars (Special Reservation of Seats in Educational Institutions and of Appointments or Posts in the Services under the State within the Reservation

for the Scheduled Castes) Act, 2009. This legislation established a 3% internal sub-quota within the overall 18% SC reservation.

Table 1: Evaluation of State Policy Interventions & Structural Outcomes

Focus Domain	Policy / Institutional Mechanism	Observed Impact	Key Challenges / Gaps
Higher Education	3% Internal Sub-Quota in Professional Courses & Universities	Increased enrollment in engineering, medical, and arts/science degrees. First-generation representation in state administration and teaching roles.	Drop-out risks due to financial pressures and lack of urban career coaching.
Public Employment	Priority allocation in state civil service recruitment	Concentration in lower-tier service cadres; limited reach in private sector.	Concentration in lower-tier service cadres; limited reach in private sector.
Financial Inclusion	TAHDCO (Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing Corp) Schemes	Entrepreneurship loans, SHG capital allocation, and housing grants.	Complex loan processing protocols and lower credit limits relative to capital needs.

VII. DISCUSSION AND KEY FINDINGS

Summary of Core Research Findings:

1. **Intersectional Vulnerability:** Arunthathiyar women face a double burden-navigating gender discrimination alongside economic precarity in informal, low-wage sectors (e.g., domestic work, agricultural labor).

2. **Policy Efficacy:** The implementation of the 3% internal reservation has proven to be a catalyst for educational access and first-generation administrative employment. However, its reach remains constrained in rural pockets where basic school education infrastructure requires further reinforcement.

3. **Socio-Economic Transition:** While youth from the community are increasingly moving away from traditional caste-bound manual occupations toward service sector jobs, structural barriers in skill acquisition and professional networks still affect high-income career progression.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusion

The socio-cultural and economic trajectory of the Arunthathiyar community reflects both long-standing structural marginalization and gradual progress driven by social movements and affirmative action. While state interventions like the 3% internal sub-quota have opened crucial doors in education and government service, achieving comprehensive socio-economic equity requires addressing root structural issues: landlessness, spatial segregation, informal debt, and educational drop-out rates.

8.2 Strategic Recommendations

- Strengthen Educational Infrastructure:** Establish specialized remedial learning, residential scholarship programs, and career guidance centers in rural blocks with significant Arunthathiyar populations.
- Promote Asset Creation & Financial Access:** Formulate targeted land purchase schemes and increase micro-capital subsidies via TAHDCO and nationalized banks for small enterprise development.
- Skill Diversification Programs:** Implement tailored, state-funded vocational training programs in technology, advanced manufacturing, and service trades to transition youth into high-growth industries.
- Civic Infrastructure Investments:** Prioritize funding for housing, sanitation, and municipal infrastructure in segregated rural settlements to eliminate spatial isolation and ensure equal access to public utilities.

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